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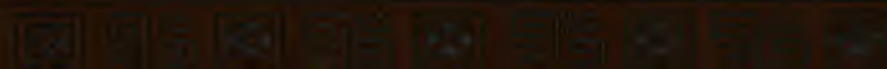
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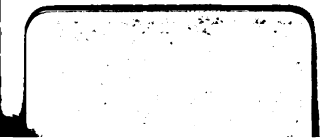
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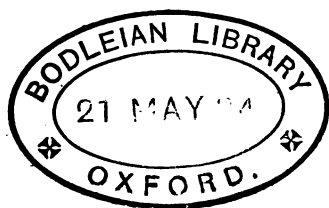
THE HEIR
OF
AYLMER'S COURT.

BY
M. E. JAMES,
AUTHORESS OF 'WHAT SHALL WE ACT?' 'HOW TO DECORATE,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.
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THE
HEIR OF AYLMER'S COURT.



PART I.



CHAPTER I.

THE YOUNG HEIR.

A HANDSOME apartment in a private hotel in one of our busiest West End streets—handsome as regards proportion and decoration, well-furnished in the upholsterer's sense of the phrase, but as unhomelike and unexpressive as such rooms always are—such is the uninteresting scene into which we must beg the courteous reader to propel his imagination. He will find himself thrust thus unceremoniously into the society of two persons, a young man and a middle-aged lady. They were very unlike each other, these two ; few persons would

have imagined them to be related, far less that they should stand to each other in the close relationship of brother and sister ; yet such was the case, the young man being the child of a second marriage. He was slight, fair, and delicate-looking ; he appeared also very much younger than his real age, while his sister seemed to have lived her life with so great an intentness of will, that every year had left its mark upon her face, darkly handsome still, but more worn and anxious-looking than is usual in a woman scarcely yet forty. She seemed impatient at the present moment, though she tried to smile, the effect of which effort was about as mirth-provoking as a neuralgic spasm.

‘ What are you drumming on that window for, Claud ? Do subside, and give me the benefit of the contents of that society

paper. We have been so long out of England that I know nothing, positively nothing, of what is going on in the world.'

Claud turned his head slightly, and bestowed on his sister and guardian a not very amiable glance.

'I'm thinking what I shall say to Jack,' he remarked shortly.

'My dear boy, your cousin won't be here for ever so long ; I hope you don't mean to fidget from now till that happy moment arrives,' cried Mrs. Crosby, with a laugh about as real and hearty as her spasm-smile. 'You are more like a girl waiting to welcome a lover than a young man who is heir to a fine estate, merely making the acquaintance of his cousin,—who isn't!'

Claud flushed hotly, and seemed about to express his feelings in some angry

words, when the sudden pulling up of a hansom at the door made him choke down his remark and turn again to the window. A good-looking man had jumped out of the cab, paid the driver, entered the hotel, made his vigorous way up the stair, and before the waiter's 'Major Aylmer' had reached the occupants of the room, the Major himself was shaking hands warmly with Mrs. Crosby.

'Welcome, Judith! welcome back to England!' he cried, with evident and invigorating friendliness. 'Upon my word, I thought you meant to cut us altogether.'

While Judith was disclaiming any such intention, with a voice that tried to be as frank and cordial as his own, but wasn't, Major Aylmer glanced quickly round the room. Claud Aylmer still stood in the recess of the window, his face flushed, his

eyes full of a vague trouble. His cousin, who knew him not at all, took him for a shy boy, to be set at his ease by a friendly greeting ; his sister, who knew him well, trembled, and gave him a glance, half warning, half commanding.

‘Let me introduce you,’ she cried, with gaiety that had a false ring in it ; ‘it is so long since you have seen each other. John Aylmer, this is your little cousin Claud, the heir of Aylmer’s Court.’

‘And an uncommonly jolly place to be heir of,’ responded John, ‘thinking in his heart that Judith was theatrical, as she always used to be. ‘I wish you joy, my boy. I shouldn’t have known you. I haven’t seen you since you were a pretty little chap in a sailor’s suit. You are a pretty little chap still, as far as that goes.’

The flush on the boy’s face deepened into

crimson, and Jack Aylmer, fearing that he had, by his injudicious choice of adjectives, hurt the youth's feelings where youthful feeling is very easily wounded, hastened to add :

‘Not little for your age, of course ; you look as if you had lots of growth in you yet.’

‘What do you imagine to be my age, Cousin John ?’ These were the first words Claud had spoken, and in a vague way they startled his cousin. It was something unexpected ; different from the hasty idea which he had formed of his young relative. John was not by any means imaginative, but we all, even the most prosaic of us, are apt to build up theories of our new acquaintance which he not unfrequently puts to flight at once and for ever, in the course of a few moments’ conversation. Jack gave up the idea of the shy lad to be set

at ease by a mental slap on the back, but felt himself at a loss for a new theory to take the place of the disproved one ; the boy's voice was quiet, rather measured, and decidedly sad. A prig ? That would be worse ; in the meantime, pending the decision on Claud's character, Jack answered his question.

‘Well, I suppose you are somewhere about seventeen ?’ he hazarded dubiously.

‘I shall be twenty-one in three months ; not much chance of growing,’ answered Claud.

‘Twenty-one!’ shouted Jack, thoroughly surprised now. ‘Why, bless my soul, it can’t be twenty-one years since——’ He stopped short, and turned in a hesitating way to Judith.

‘It is twenty-one years—since Claud was born,’ said Judith coldly.

‘Bless my soul!’ repeated the Major—it seemed the only observation he was sure of—‘nearly twenty-one! why, you don’t look seventeen. It comes of foreign food and ways; you ought to have brought him up in England, Judith, and made a man of him.’

This observation seemed exceedingly displeasing to Mrs. Crosby. She favoured John with a cold stare.

‘You always had a trick of believing in your own wisdom—I remember that failing of old; but as it happened to be a question of bringing Claud up abroad or not at all——’

‘Oh, delicate—I see; poor little fellow!’ interrupted Jack, wishing to propitiate his offended relative. ‘I see; of course—very natural.’

‘I am not the least delicate; I have never had a day’s illness in my life,’ Claud’s

clear voice cut into the discourse with slow distinctness.

The Major's instincts prompted him to indulge in a low whistle, but he subdued them, and only relieved his feelings by murmuring 'Hallo' to himself. He was getting thoroughly perplexed; Judith was getting equally angry.

'If you two *gentlemen*,' she said, with a scornful emphasis on the word, 'had not interrupted me, I was going to say that when Claud was committed to my charge, on the death of his mother, he was so fragile a child that I felt it my duty to take him at once to a warm climate, and give him at least a chance for his life. He throve there, and I kept him there. I have no doubt, John Aylmer, that you would have preferred that I should have kept him in England.'

The malicious insinuation conveyed in this remark was so manifest, that Major Aylmer in his turn grew somewhat red and felt decidedly angry and aggrieved. He was on the point of making an indignant rejoinder, when he reflected that it was 'only Judith,' and Judith perhaps had reasons for disliking him; it was no good quarrelling about nothing, and he wanted to be a friend to the boy. His reflections were put an end to by the boy's voice.

'Do not let us argue about what might or might not have been twenty years ago. Major Aylmer, I am going to ask a favour of you. Right or wrong, my foreign life has made a stranger of me in my own home. Will you come down with me to Aylmer's Court, and introduce me to the place and the people?'

'Of course I will; delighted,' responded

Jack, with quick cordiality. 'You'll find the place all right; your tenants were good ones—awfully sorry to turn out, I can tell you, but had to make way for the rightful owner, you know. It will be jolly to see the old place with an Aylmer reigning in it once more.'

'Thank you; it's awfully good of you to say that.'

Claud's earnest gratitude seemed a little beyond what the occasion warranted. Judith watched him with cold displeasure in her eyes, but with an inward tremor of fear; she took up some fancy-work, but her hands trembled slightly.

'And as for the people,' proceeded the Major, 'they will welcome you with open arms, one and all. I'll introduce you to the whole lot, high and low; jolly old squires—yes, and jolly old squires, too;

boys from college, and girls—I think we've some of the nicest girls in the world down at Aylmer.'

'Really,' put in Claud, as he seemed to be expected to say something; but the fervour had gone out of his voice.

'Yes, awfully nice. Of course a young fellow like you will want to hear about the girls. I know what I'll do for you: I'll introduce you to Sally—that is, Miss Brand; she'll take you in hand, and I expect you'll have a lively time of it;' and Jack chuckled joyfully, in anticipation of the liveliness that he prophesied.

'I don't think Miss Sally Brand sounds very attractive; but, of course, if she is a great friend of yours——'

'Oh, she is a great friend of everybody's. Nothing goes off without Sally; she's the greatest fun imaginable, looking as staid

as a Quaker all the time. You must have Sally for the coming-of-age festivities. I suppose you mean to be festive, don't you? Balls, bonfires, olden-time business, in short?

'I suppose so,' said Claud, rather absently.
'Oh yes!'

'Well then, take my advice and make friends with Sally. Then another thing you'll have to see to, your horses. You hunt, I suppose?'

He looked at Claud rather doubtfully as he spoke, not believing in foreign education on this point; but still he felt surprised at Claud's confusion. Judith interposed wrathfully.

'You speak heedlessly, John. You cannot have forgotten that this is, to us, a most painful subject.'

'Oh, ah! I beg your pardon. Poor

Uncle Aylmer ! But still that is so long ago, and a most unlikely thing, you know, to happen twice in the same family ; chances strong against it. Don't believe he'd have liked Claud to give it up for that ; it is an Englishman's chief——'

'I must beg you will say no more on the subject, John,' interrupted Mrs. Crosby ; 'it is distressing to me, and I cannot allow it to be discussed in my presence.'

Soon after this very decided snub, Jack Aylmer took his leave ; but not before he had promised his young cousin to accompany him on his journey to his almost unknown home, Claud appearing somewhat morbidly anxious to have the support and countenance of his only near male relative on the occasion of his entrance into his new life. Jack Aylmer had also placed his club and himself at the disposal of the young

head of his house during his stay in town ; but these hospitable offers were declined quietly by Claud, but very decidedly by his sister, who objected altogether to the club, and only agreed to the theatre on the understanding that she was not to be left out. The inference that she did not trust him as a guide for youth, was so obvious as to ruffle the equanimity of even good-natured Jack Aylmer.

‘Confound the woman!’ he cried mentally ; ‘thinks I’m not fit to be trusted with the boy. Who would have thought Judith would turn into a regular old hen with one duckling. Well, he won’t be tied to her apron-string much longer, poor little devil!’ he concluded, with a slight confusion of metaphor, as he jumped into a hansom and departed to his rejected club.

CHAPTER II.

JUDITH.

MAJOR AYLMER was fulfilling the promise he had made his cousin, and was travelling with him and Judith as fast as an express train would take them down to Aylmer, the nearest station to the Court. To a casual observer this fulfilment did not appear to involve much sacrifice: the journey was only a run of three or four hours' duration, through pretty midland scenery, and was undertaken in a comfortable first-class carriage in the society of a remarkably handsome woman and a quiet, well-mannered boy; yet there were circum-

stances in the case which made Jack Aylmer look upon himself as distinctly commendable, or, as he put it, as a good-natured fool, as he meditated on his compliance while he was being driven to Paddington. Judith's reception of him had been decidedly unfriendly; that perhaps might be accounted for by events which, though long past, might still have left unpleasant memories; but more than this, there was something about Mrs. Crosby which had inspired a vague sense of distrust in her cousin's usually unsuspicious mind. Jack was not given to analyzing his feelings, but he knew that he hated suspecting people, and consequently felt annoyed with himself and with the person who gave rise to the feeling.

‘Why can't the woman be herself? What on earth is she always acting a part for?’

Isn't it good enough to be Judith Aylmer, or Judith Crosby—though Crosby was an unaccountable mistake—without being a tragedy queen as well ?'

These were his reflections as he reached the station, and suggested a smoking-carriage rather hurriedly to Claud. Judith, however, interposed, and in a much more amiable manner than she had hitherto bestowed on Jack, requested the gentlemen to come at all events part of the way in her carriage. They got in accordingly, and found one other occupant already settled in the compartment, a middle-aged man of a very usual type, gentlemanly but *blasé*.

He gazed at Judith with very open admiration, and, it must be owned, Judith was a woman very well worth staring at. She had been a beautiful girl, but perhaps in some respects she was handsomer at

forty than she had been at twenty. She was tall, and her figure was superbly moulded, where, perhaps, as a girl she had been rather gaunt ; her complexion was pale, but showed no trace of delicacy ; her forehead gleamed low and white under her dusky hair ; her resolute, scarlet lips were perhaps devoid of sweetness of expression, but left nothing to be desired with regard to shape and colour. But you forgot her other features when you saw her eyes ; darkly beautiful, they invited you to look into their depths, and then—told you nothing. She always dressed in the softest and richest materials ; she always looked haughty and high-born, and she could, on occasion, look stern as a statue of Justice or Revenge, or any abstract, repellent idea cut in stone.

At present, however, she was smiling

and gracious to a very unusual degree. She had noticed the stranger's very evident admiration, and instead of crushing it as she usually did these passing tributes, which were of very common occurrence, she appeared rather gratified by the homage. In fact, it had given her an idea, and she smiled, not at the donor, but at the idea.

Why should it not be? Men found her fair still, and John Aylmer was a man like the rest. He was twenty years older now than he had been when—— But she frowned even in her reverie, and passed on quickly to the next stage of thought. It would be a good thing for him; financially, it would be the making of him; while for herself, it would be safety.

Deep at the bottom of her heart there was a great swell of wrath and bitterness against this man, but on the surface she

let the sun shine and the ripples play. Of real affection for him she had not one spark, nor of the sweet old-world feeling which often unites those who have been boy and girl together, and who have played together in the primrose and daffodil time of life—the fierce fire of a passionate revenge had burnt all these tender flowers of memory out of her heart. But now a new idea took possession of her brain : revenge had been satisfied, without satisfying ; its last consummation was about to be performed. But though she had been successful, she had failed ; and her nerves were rather shaken, it was so near the end—it was probably that which made her think of safety. She was victorious, but she would be glad to be safe.

In the meantime, her unknown admirer had picked up an acquaintance with the

gentlemen of the party, by the usual offers of newspapers and books and the unvarying remarks on the weather and country. He soon contrived to include Judith in the conversation, and was not annihilated as Jack fully expected he would be, and as he rather maliciously hoped he might be ; few men, we imagine, rise superior to the gratification of seeing another man snubbed by a handsome woman to whom he has been obtrusively polite. It was not that this man said anything that could be objected to, but the look in his bold eyes expressed admiration more openly than Jack deemed fitting, or than, as he mentally expressed it, Judith would have stood, according to his remembrance of her in former days. He put down the change as he put down so many things, as being an unfortunate result of life abroad.

This was not in the least the idea that Judith wished to suggest to his mind. She imagined that it would become obvious to him, by the simplest of all methods—the use of his eyes—that she was a woman to be admired and rendered homage to, that her beauty was powerful still. Unfortunately, people persist in evolving ideas according to the bent of their own minds, heedless of our directing schemes.

At Didcot, the unconscious instrument of Judith's guiding hand had to change trains, and our trio were left to their own company. Claud was buried in the *Times*, as he had been all the way from Paddington ; Jack thought he had never met such a singularly silent boy in his life before. 'Comes of having an elder sister with no end of a will of her own,' mused Jack, making, as we all do, stray shots at the

inner conditions of life of our acquaintances.

‘Claud is such an unsociable boy,’ said Judith, remarking the direction of Major Aylmer’s glance ; ‘never mind, Jack, you must amuse me.’

It was the first time she had called him Jack for more than twenty years. They had not been much together in the interim certainly ; but still they had met occasionally, and her manner to him had invariably been marked by a cold formality. This sudden thaw surprised Jack more than it flattered him ; in some subtle way it gave him a chill : a not unfrequent result of an actual thaw to people who don’t want it—skaters, for instance. He answered a little stiffly :

‘If you want amusement, it is a pity your unknown friend had to depart ; that

sort of thing is a good deal more in his line than mine, I expect.'

'I dare say he is very amusing ; but one could hardly judge in half an hour's conversation, liberally interspersed with jolts, and bumps, and screams,' answered Judith, inwardly charmed with her cousin's ill-humour, which she wrongly ascribed to incipient jealousy. 'Didn't you like him, Jack ?'

'I am not in the habit of liking people I meet casually,' said John, in his most English manner. 'I thought he seemed uncommonly free and easy. I expected him to ask your name next, and where you lived.'

'Did you, really ?' asked Judith, rather overdoing the innocence of her most innocent manner. 'I wouldn't have spoken to him if I had known you disliked it, Jack.'

‘Oh, I didn’t dislike it—it was nothing to me,’ disclaimed Jack hastily. ‘And you seemed to like it, so it was all right.’

‘You are really Oriental in your ideas, Jack. Is no one to look at the ladies of your family but—yourself?’

Judith turned the dark splendour of her eyes towards her cousin, her scarlet lips smiling, the faintest flush of colour in her creamy cheeks. She was very handsome, certainly—she was worth looking at; but Jack was an artilleryman, and had been under fire of all sorts many times. His under-current of thought now was rather more prosaic than usual. ‘What on earth is the woman driving at?’ he mentally ejaculated.

Claud turned over his newspaper with a crash.

‘Bad news from the East!’ he observed

shortly, and his cousin chiming in, politics occupied the conversation for some time, till Claud once more buried himself in his paper.

They had got into their own county by this time, and Judith amused herself by pointing out the various houses at which she had stayed as a girl, and the many changes which had happened since that period. She noticed them more than her cousin did, for he had been so much more frequently in the county ; his mother lived at a small place near Aylmer, and of course he had been in the habit of spending a considerable portion of his leave with her.

He was a favourite in the county, too, and was intimate at most of these houses where Judith had passed the happy girlish hours she was telling him about. She was softer and gentler than he had ever known her, even in those youthful days, the

memory of which brought this tender, pensive feeling ; and though she made the past more lovely than it actually was, is it not true that it absolutely seems so to all of us, as a village seen through a mist is infinitely more poetical than that village as you walk up its principal street ? The golden haze of years came between Judith's old life at Aylmer Court and her present return to it ; and it was natural that she should glorify the past at the expense of the present. We all do so—all of us who have passed the midway house of five-and-thirty. They were speaking of events which occurred before Claud was born, and Claud took no part in the conversation, but remained buried in papers, trying with strict impartiality the various merits of the *Standard*, the *Daily News*, and the *Telegraph*.'

‘I am so glad Aunt Aylmer will be at the Court to welcome us,’ said Judith, referring to Jack’s mother, not really her aunt, for she and Jack were second cousins; but it had been a custom in the family so to name these relatives, as Jack also had called Judith’s father Uncle Aylmer. ‘She was so kind to me as a girl—the most indulgent chaperon that anyone could desire; though she very often lost me—dropped me about, as it were; and sometimes she lost herself. Don’t you remember the sort of hide-and-seek she used to indulge in when we stayed at Bampton Castle, and she generally ended by finding herself in somebody else’s room, after all her efforts?’

Jack chuckled.

‘My mother’s idea of geography never was her strong point,’ he admitted.

‘Aunt Aylmer was exactly like a mother to me, except that she never found fault with me,’ pursued Judith reflectively. ‘I used always to think of her as a mother, until——’

Suddenly Judith broke off, blushing vividly—a sudden startled scarlet that there could be no mistake about. Jack blushed too, a dusky shame-faced red: the same idea had crossed both minds, but her blush had given it vehemence and point. Jack was startled and puzzled; he had almost forgotten this old-world story, and he thought she had also; the episode of Crosby had come in since then, besides twenty years had gone by: yet there they were, two old fools blushing at each other as if they were boy and girl. Jack was angry with himself, and got redder. Judith’s blush had subsided to a very

becoming tint, and her dark eyes looked at him softly and half shyly. Jack was the least vain man alive, and he could not make it out. What on earth did she blush for? It was not a blush of anger; that he might have understood—some circumstances in the past would have explained that.

‘Hang it all,’ mused Jack in his usual way, ‘I don’t believe she ever cared much about me—not really, you know—and she’s not very likely to begin to now. Is she acting? I wonder if Solomon himself would know what she is at?’

Major Aylmer might have assured himself that the wise king, in spite of his great opportunities for studying female character, would not have known what she was at, or whether she was acting or in earnest, the wisdom of men being utter foolishness

when they attempt to understand the workings of a woman's mind, or the motives of a woman's actions. Jack was wise enough to give it up. The tension was suddenly relieved by Claud, who jumped up suddenly and impatiently. They were stopping at a station now; having left the main line, their progress seemed to consist chiefly in stopping at stations.

‘It's insufferably hot!’ cried Claud, looking almost as flushed as the others. ‘We have twenty minutes more of this. Jack, let us go and have a smoke.’

CHAPTER III.

AYLMER'S COURT.

THE small but ancient town of Aylmer had arrayed itself in festal arches in honour of the arrival of the young heir to the old name. The original Aylmer—at least, the first whose history had descended to the present time—had been a Norman knight, who had built and given his name to the Castle round which the houses of his squires and dependents had clustered and gradually formed a town, the inhabitants of which prided themselves much on their charters and ancient deeds and privileges, though at the present time the place was not much

larger than a village. The castle was only a picturesque ruin, the Aylmers having transferred themselves in the reign of Elizabeth to the Court, doubtless a much more convenient and comfortable residence. The family had lost a few members in the time of the Commonwealth, and having had rather bad treatment from the early Georges, their ancient power and glory had departed ; but though only squires now, they had every right to be proud of their untarnished honour and costly loyalty, and of the old name which had come through so many centuries, always in the male line, and generally from father to son.

There was quite a little crowd at the station to receive the last young scion of the old stock : a flag waved from the ruins of the Castle, a decorative idea which perhaps did not convey much abstract joy-

fulness to a contemplative mind : the bells of the old church clanged as mirthfully as the pullers, expectant of ale and fees, could make them ; but they, too, seemed attuned to other uses by the wear and tear of ages than that of flinging compliments to a boy.

The boy, on this occasion, would very much have preferred being left alone. He and Jack descended hastily from their smoking-carriage, helped out Judith, who looked rather crossly at Claud, collected her maid, an elderly female given to straying aimlessly about, and were going, as Jack elegantly expressed it, 'to make a bolt for it,' when they were suddenly encountered by the portreeve and the burghers.

Jack smothered an exclamation of an emphatic but unpolite nature, and then recovered his manners sufficiently to introduce Claud to the representative of the

townsmen, a red and oleaginous grocer, who seemed, as Mrs. Baker, the maid, expressed it, 'considerable flustered' by the responsibilities which had suddenly devolved on him in the execution of his office. He bowed low, which seemed to make him hotter still; but he totally declined to take Jack's commonplace view of the situation which had been expressed in his first words of greeting—words scarcely worthy of being recorded save for the fact that they did contain a view.

'Hallo, Mr. Sims! how d'you do? Warm day, isn't it? Come to meet my cousin? Here he is.'

But Mr. Sims, flustered as he was, had no intention of following this new departure, and allowing a friendly and everyday greeting to be used instead of his pre-arranged and carefully selected words. He had hope-

fully believed that he had them in his head, but when it came to the point he was very glad to remember that he had them most securely in his pocket. After executing his bow, therefore, he dived surreptitiously into that receptacle and drew forth his manuscript. The old legend states that Satan, in the form of restless and uncertain gusts of wind, used to lurk round the corners of holy cathedrals, either in the vain hope of getting in, or more probably as a convenient position from which to attack poor sinners coming out, who might be expected to be lulled into a false security after the pious exercises just performed. However this may be, in modern days the fiend seems to have shifted his quarters to our unromantic railway stations, perhaps having arrived at the conclusion that more sinners are to be found there now than

inside our churches. When there is no wind anywhere else, there is a draught at a railway station. At this moment a sudden gust swept along the platform at Aylmer, and carried with it the portreeve's speech. Mr. Sims made a hasty snatch and missed it, and seemed on the point of giving chase, though some feeling that it might be *infra dig.* to move so rapidly in his robes held his feet, when Jack came to the rescue.

‘Never mind, Mr. Sims,’ he said, suppressing a strong inclination to laugh, a fine feeling not indulged in by Mr. Sims’ followers who grinned loudly, heedless of the furious looks cast on them by their chief—‘never mind, Mr. Sims; Mr. Aylmer will “take it as read.”’

‘If Mr. Sims will do me the favour to take a seat in the carriage and accompany us to the Court, I shall feel obliged,

and we can hear what the speech contained.'

Claud's clear young voice fell on the burning ears of Sims courteously and pleasantly ; his allegiance was secured at once and for ever. From that day he always spoke of the young heir and himself as 'we.'

'Thank you, sir,' was all he said now ; probably the shortest speech ever made by a man in robes of office. But he cast annihilating glances of triumph on his so-called supporters, as he followed Judith into the carriage, an open one. Jack and Claud jumped in, and they drove off amid the cheers of the small but excited crowd. Up the steep High Street, narrow, irregular, and picturesque, past the old Castle, the home of their race, under triumphal arches and through admiring crowds they passed as quickly as the nature of the ground would

permit ; Judith bowing and smiling, regal as a typical queen ; Jack exchanging nods and greetings with familiar friends, which included a large part of the population ; Sims radiant ; Claud pale and quiet, a tightened look about his mouth instead of the smiles that might have been looked for, acknowledging courteously the cheers that greeted him, but otherwise having little of the aspect of a man come to take joyous possession of his own. Occasionally he asked for some local information from Mr. Sims, and that worthy man, having now recovered the use of his tongue, though still finding Judith rather oppressive, seized the opportunity of bringing in some points of his lost speech. There had been a good deal of history in it and a little archæology, on his knowledge of which he prided himself greatly ; and Claud's questions about the

Castle gave him a valuable opening. He had introduced much religious feeling into his address—was he not a deacon in his chapel, and was not this an opportunity of saying a few words in season not to be lost, seeing that owing to Mrs. Crosby's unaccountable up-bringing of her young brother, he had probably never listened to a Christian discourse before? But now, for some reason—probably because Judith's haughty eyes and scornful mouth were so near—he did not allude to any of the devout aspirations which he and his confrères had indulged in.

Twenty minutes' drive along a pretty English road brought them to the entrance of their own park. A picturesque rustic lodge stood on either side of the road, and the family belonging to each stood each in front of its own domicile, trying to look as if it loved its neighbour ; which, it may be

stated briefly, it didn't on ordinary occasions. There were more flags and arches, and another little crowd, composed chiefly of minor tenants and labourers on the estate, waiting by the gates to see the young heir pass in. They cheered and shouted lustily, and yet the sight did not seem to have afforded them much gratification judging from the comments they made when he had passed—comments sufficiently loud to be audible to Mrs. Baker, who followed in a second carriage, and which were listened to by her in speechless indignation.

‘Well, he ain't a patch upon his feyther, the ould Squire, as far's I see,’ remarked one observer.

‘No; he's a white-faced, pawky-looking crut,’ returned her neighbour; for it is needless to remark these quick judgments were generally passed by the fair sex.

‘They do say he can ’ardly tork Henglish,’ added a third, jealous for her native tongue.

‘Well, if he’ve a-learnt any ’eathen ways, ’e’ll ’ave to drop ’em ’ere,’ chimed in a friend.

But Mrs. Baker was now beyond the reach of envious tongues, and speeding through the lovely park that surrounds Aylmer’s Court. On this sweet June day, the scene was as fair as any to be met with in beautiful England. The magnificent trees, the intense verdure of the grass, the glades, the gentle hollows, and the thicker plantations in the distance, gave Claud a delicious dream-like sense of repose unusual to him. He had seen hundreds of more striking scenes during his life abroad, none so lovely or so soothing. It was almost new to him ; the last time he had been

here, when ten years old, he had been more intent on watching the deer than occupied with the landscape.

They came in sight of the Court—a long, low house, in the picturesque Elizabethan style, which stood rather above them, its terraces and gardens running down to a pretty little lake. Behind the house the ground rose into what might be called a line of hills—not high, certainly, but high enough to have blue shadows in the hollows ; while here and there a bold rock started out from among the foliage, with which, in most places, the hillside was clothed and crowned.

‘How beautiful it is, Jack!’ cried Claud, almost involuntarily.

‘Yes ; to my mind there’s no place like Aylmer’s Court,’ said Jack, with a half-sigh.

Judith looked at him keenly, while a

cruel light lit up her eyes. Yes, she had triumphed : this was one of the moments for which she had lived. Jack did not notice her—he was looking at the dear old house ; but Claud caught the expression of her face, and in an instant his own changed. The happy, young look fled. He was once more white, and almost sternly quiet ; and he gave his sister a glance before which her own eyes fell.

In the courtyard the agents of the estate and the principal tenants had gathered to add their words of welcome, after which effort they were to feast and make merry at the expense of the heir. Claud found that he was expected to say a few words in answer to their greetings ; and he did so. The very few words he spoke had the merit of originality ; they were exceedingly unlike the little set

speeches usually made by young heirs on these happy occasions. He said nothing about duties, or pleasures, or mutual assistance, or the great and ineffable bliss of a life passed in the midst of them. He did not flatter them. He knew nothing about them, and did not pretend to ; and he did not flatter himself by any assumed humility. His words gave an impression of genuine want of self-confidence that was not pleasing to his hearers, who could not understand it. He said he knew nothing—nothing of agriculture, nothing of politics, nothing of country life in any way. In any questions that might arise between them, in any grievances or disputes, he should, if he relied on his own judgment, make inevitable mistakes. He should, therefore, in every matter, be guided entirely and solely by the advice of his cousin, Major Aylmer, who

was also his heir, and whom he wished all present to regard as the master of Aylmer's Court.

This speech had the unusual result of being a surprise to all who heard it, but to none more so than to Jack Aylmer himself, who ejaculated hastily, 'My dear fellow, what on earth are you talking about?' and then subsided into pure astonishment; he could not make Claud out at all—and his 'shy-boy' theory was more than ever a failure. Claud had not even stuttered, or looked self-conscious over his speech; on the contrary, his quiet self-possession was remarkable in a lad of his age. The tenantry were more surprised than pleased; they would have preferred the usual type of speech, the bucolic mind resenting innovations. But the person most displeased was the young man's sister and guardian, Mrs.

Crosby. No allusion had been made to her. Her rights had been quietly ignored in favour of Jack Aylmer, and her instructions and advice had been scorned. The rest of the auditors had remarked this fact also, and drew their own inferences from it.

‘Don’t seem to have hit it off with the old un,’ observed one individual facetiously.

‘She looks blacker than ever, and she wur always a dark un,’ responded his friend.

‘He is a poor-spirited sap, I’m afeard,’ said a third.

‘I wish Major Aylmer was the master, I do.’

‘Don’t you be down on the lad without giving un a trial,’ said a fat old fellow of the true John Bull type. ‘He’ve a real look of the ould Squire—he features him

strong, a deal more than Madam Judith does—and some of the old Squire's jolly ways will crop up in un sooner or later, never fear. D'ye mind that his poor ma' had such a turn afore he wur born, and that'll account for his being a bit white and starved-looking. But he'll come ; you give him time, he'll come.'

In the meantime, the party had made their way to the principal entrance to the house, where, ranged on either side, stood groups of servants, while on the top of the steps Mrs. Aylmer waited to receive her kinsfolk. Her son had given his arm to Mrs. Crosby, and they came up the steps together, while Claud lingered behind them.

'Welcome to Aylmer's Court !' cried the little old lady mirthfully—and, unfortunately, when she was mirthful she

usually said the wrong thing—just the precise thing that she ought not to have said. ‘Welcome to Aylmer’s Court ! Why, Jack, you look like the lord of the Castle bringing home his bride !’

‘Nonsense, mother !’ said Jack brusquely, and standing aside to make way for his cousin. ‘This is Claud—the heir of Aylmer’s Court.’

‘Altogether,’ said Mr. Sims afterwards, ‘we had a very successful reception.’

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE TERRACE.

IT is not to be denied that a small family party is generally the reverse of a success in any social sense of the word. The component parts do not amalgamate; they are sometimes too intimate to care about taking the trouble to scintillate, or else there is something of distrust mixed up with their feelings. They are strangers, but they cannot be to each other as strangers, here to-day and gone to-morrow; they know that for good or evil they must cross each other's paths frequently in the years to come, and this knowledge gives

a sense of restraint amongst kindred, who are still, if not a 'little less than kind,' at all events a little fluctuating in their regard.

After a stately and formal dinner, which had begun by a slight unpleasantness owing to the young master of the house requesting Mrs. Aylmer and her son to take the top and bottom of the table, which both had declined to do, and Jack had settled finally by planting his mother safely on one side, and establishing himself on the other, while Judith, inwardly furious, tried to carry off the matter as a jest, and took the head of the table with a smile that boded no good for Claud at their next *tête-à-tête*—after this excellent but uncomfortable dinner the ladies of course departed into the drawing-room, and left the gentlemen over their wine. They thawed almost immediately.

‘You must fill the house, you know, Claud,’ cried Jack; ‘you’ll be moped to death with old fogies like us. That’s the good of a big house—holds lots of people. We must have Sally and all the rest.’

‘Certainly,’ acquiesced Claud; ‘but we can’t ask them till we know them, can we? They haven’t called yet.’

‘Oh, the Brands will call to-morrow, sure to. They live close by, and they are always running over when my mother is here.’

‘Tell me something about our neighbours; I know nothing about them,’ said Claud. And Jack started off at score, amusing himself and his cousin at the same time.

Judith was not faring quite so well in the drawing-room, though her companion was the Aunt Aylmer of whom she pro-

fessed to be so fond. The old lady was decidedly afraid of her haughty relative, and that little unpleasantness about the head of the table might be resented by Judith, and visited on the unoffending head of her aunt. That head was now adorned in a rather remarkable manner. Mrs. Aylmer had visions of æstheticism in a dreamy and far-off manner; she invested in high art needlework, which she worked at intermittently—and very badly, it must be owned—and usually got Miss Brand, or some of her other young friends, to finish; she interlarded her conversation with a few cultured remarks, when she remembered to do so; and she tried to show her feelings in her costume. She was really anxious that her dress should convey to the eyes of the observer that she had ideas of art and beauty, and

she rightly considered that even a cap might be the medium of bearing her thought to the outside world. But as her ideas were a little confused, it is not surprising that her dress faithfully reproduced the confusion as well as the idea. It is, moreover, rather difficult to combine an elderly lady's modern 'dinner-cap' with any æsthetic design; this revival of classic culte or beauty-worship being obviously only suited to the young and fair, who require no other adornment for their heads than Nature's crown of hair. Mrs. Aylmer could not trust to that—far from it; hence the æsthetic cap. This difficult combination was the despair of milliners; and to make the perplexity still more perplexing, Mrs. Aylmer's natural taste cried out for recognition, and required to be represented too. Her own feelings inclined her to

warm primaries, or at most would she descend, of her free will, to secondaries; but strict high art maxims demanded her allegiance to cool tertiaries. She thought them dingy and depressing in her secret soul, though aloud she swore by them—when she remembered to do so. Her spirit in this matter was willing, but her flesh demanded a rose-coloured bow to be set in the midst of the otherwise cultured colouring of the cap which adorned her round little head. Her round little face, rather pretty, rather fat, and very unspiritual, gazed out on the world in the smiling belief that it was the transparent cover of the soul for art that, worn and earnest-eyed, reigned within. Her knowledge of art was as nearly as possible nil; but the secret of her enthusiasm is easily explained. She had been staying in a

cultured household, and she had caught up the outward signs of it as easily and unconsciously as a child takes the measles.

‘My dear, you do not mean to say you did not go to see the new Botticelli in the National Gallery?’ She was sipping a cup of coffee and purring to her niece, who was wishing devoutly that she would be quiet and go to sleep.

‘We made so short a stay in London,’ answered Judith; ‘and then we have seen any amount of Botticellis in Italy.’

‘You can never see enough Botticelli,’ murmured the little lady languidly. ‘He is so precious and so natural.’

‘Natural, my dear aunt! What is there in Nature akin to tiers of little, set-faced, small-eyed angels, standing in circles one above the other?’ asked Judith, who was in a contradictory mood. She could,

when she was in the humour for it, admire the Pre-Raphaelite painters very sincerely, having naturally a fine taste in art, and a considerable knowledge of pictures. 'Can you imagine that a series of circles represents Heaven?'

'I don't know, my dear,' answered Mrs. Aylmer naïvely. 'I never was there, but I know that Botticelli is precious. So were all those old painters, I fancy—very precious and very expensive. I have been studying their lives, and I find it so refreshing, though some of them were quite too dreadfully scampish. Fra Angelico, for instance, indulged in pranks most unbecoming in a monk.'

'Fra Angelico! You must mean Fra Lippo Lippi,' said Judith impatiently.

'Ah, very likely. I do get so mixed up with these Fras. You must own they are

very puzzling, though delightful, of course. I can't help wishing those old Italians had more Christian sorts of names ; theirs, no doubt, are mediæval, and all that, but they are so difficult to remember. There doesn't seem much sense in Simaboo and Masakkio.'

'There doesn't indeed.' For once her niece agreed with her.

'I suppose Claud knows all about them. He is quite an artist, isn't he?'

'Yes, Claud paints well, and is very devoted to art,' Judith answered absently.

'Ah, perhaps that accounts for his being so pale and sad-looking. We æsthetic people generally are so, you know—the tax we pay for acquiring soul. Still, it seems almost a pity for a young man with such bright prospects.' Kind Mrs. Aylmer evidently thought art and soul could be

too dearly bought. 'He doesn't seem half as light-hearted as my boy, who has no prospects at all, to speak of.'

'Claud is always quiet, but it is not always the noisiest people who are the happiest,' replied Judith rather spitefully. The inference, unflattering to Jack Aylmer, passed unnoticed by his mother, who thought him perfection, and was not on the look-out for detracting remarks.

'I don't want him to be noisy, my dear ; it is so Philistine to be noisy. But he looks to me like a man with a weight on his mind.'

'My dear aunt ! At his age is it likely ? You forget the peculiar circumstances of his birth,' said Judith, her pale face a little paler than usual. She rose up with the stately languor peculiar to her, and began turning over the books on the table.

‘What do you prefer occupying the evening with, aunt? Books, or work, or healthful play—which in our case means cards, I suppose?’

‘I fear cards are not soul-satisfying,’ said Mrs. Aylmer, who inwardly loved a quite game of *bésique*, or even patience,—indulgences her new culte denied her. ‘I have my work here; I got it myself at South Kensington—the very highest art, my dear. It looks as flat as if it had been ironed—the design I mean, not my work, which is rather puckered.’

Judith looked with what she hoped was an appearance of interest at some faint and sprawling lines which meandered about vaguely on a mustard-hued square of material, in the corner of which a little colour and a good deal of pucker showed where the work had been begun.

‘I am not so young as I was, my dear,’ continued the old lady. ‘I don’t like to try my eyes by working at night; but if you would like to go on with it——’

‘I am not so young as I was, either,’ declined Judith hastily. ‘Aunt, I know what you would like—a quiet little nap; so let me settle you comfortably first, and then I will stroll about on the terrace; the evening is so lovely.’

Mrs. Aylmer made no objection to this arrangement, and soon her fat little chin was making sudden dives towards the rather Philistine brooch that adorned the front of her dusky-hued gown, over which pale yellow-green flowers straggled sadly. There was a little conservatory at the end of the drawing-room, through which Judith passed. She came out on the terrace, looking in her dark robes like the Queen of Night herself;

the sun had set, but the twilight still lingered ; the sky was of that clear yellow-bluish hue which is so wonderfully tender and pathetic. The moon was clearly to be seen, but as yet she did not give much light ; everything was wrapped in vague shadows, or half revealed by sweet uncertain lights. The scent of the roses and other flowers came up from the gardens beneath and entranced the senses, the nightingales were bewildering in the passion of their songs of love ; it was, indeed, a garden of delight on this sweet June night.

Judith's mood, however, as so frequently happens, did not accord with Nature's : she moved with more impatience than she usually allowed to appear outwardly. She crossed the terrace and flung her arms down on the top of the marble balustrades

with a force that must have hurt her, though she did not seem to notice it. 'What a fool Claud is!' she mused; 'an ungrateful fool, too, after all I have done for him. Even that old imbecile noticed that there was something strange in his manner—"a weight on his mind," she said. As if we hadn't most of us weights on our minds, but we need not show them to every passer-by. Setting up John Aylmer too, and bidding us all bow down to him, and slighting me in a marked manner on every occasion. If I could have known how he would have turned out, should I have borne that risk for him twenty years ago ?'

A peal of laughter came through the open dining-room windows, Jack's sonorous shout mingled with the clear tones of Claud's young voice ; the sound

seemed to add to the suppressed anger of the woman who leant against the cold stone thinking and listening. She was not trying to overhear their conversation, she knew the tenor of it well enough: it was merely good-natured gossip, she did not care to hear it in the least; but the fact that they laughed together filled her heart with bitter anger. 'That is what it will be,' she mused—'two against one. Was it worth fighting through it all for this? John Aylmer will virtually be master here, and I—shall not even be mistress.' Oppressed by wearying thought, she gazed at the sad, calm heaven; its clear hue was reflected in the little lake below the gardens. How peaceful it all was, all—save that laughter which jarred on her! She began to walk slowly up and down the terrace, past the dining-room windows; and as she passed,

stately and dark against the clear sad sky, the laughter ceased.

The moon was getting brighter every moment ; night was gaining the victory. As she paced there in the cool darkness, Judith's thoughts grew softer. She went back to the time—more than thirty years ago—when she had played on that terrace with her beautiful, dark-eyed mother ; while her father, whose idol she was, had watched her with unconcealed pride, and had encouraged her little imperious gestures and her queenly ways. Then came her first sorrow. From these windows she had watched the funeral train that bore away her dead mother—a far more terrible misfortune for herself, an impulsive and passionate child of twelve, than she had even deemed it. For her father had done his best to console her and himself : he had

made her his companion in the house and out of it. She had been, from that early age, the mistress of his house—had sat at the head of his table, managed his servants, and himself—had gone out walking and driving with him ; but, most of all, she had enjoyed riding with him. She was a fearless horsewoman, and rode to hounds as well as any grown-up lady in the hunt. Of course she had governesses. She was always polite to them, and, to a certain extent, studied with them—for the child was clever, and loved books—but she was never ruled by them. Then came the figure of Jack—a bright, ruddy schoolboy, who used to spend part of his holidays with them, and whom she patronized. They were of the same age ; but a girl, brought up as she had been, is many years older than a schoolboy. Another scene

came across her brooding eyes—a scene on this same terrace, when her father had walked up and down, his arm resting on her shoulder, and had explained many things to her, relative to the succession to Aylmer's Court, about which she had not thought before. It was entailed on the male heir ; and the next male heir was her second cousin, John Aylmer. The bluff old Squire seemed to find considerable difficulty in explaining all he had to say ; he beat about the bush a good deal. But at last he managed to make Judith understand that a marriage between her cousin and herself would bind together the whole property — would enable his beloved daughter still to be mistress of Aylmer's Court, and would give him, personally, the very greatest satisfaction. Judith, in her queenly way, signified her acquiescence in

her father's wishes. She had no objection to her cousin. She did not care for anyone else ; and she decidedly wished to remain in the home to which she was so greatly attached.

Judith's face flamed scarlet as she remembered this willing assent of the proud girl of nineteen, who was already well accustomed to admiration and homage, earned even more by her beauty and spirit than by her wealth, and to whom it never occurred that any man should not accept the hand she was willing to bestow. Yet so it happened in this case. John Aylmer was just about to enter the army, and he would not have given up his career in order to marry the greatest heiress in broad England. He had always regarded Judith as a sister, and had no very strong affection for her, even viewed from that low altitude.

His mother, of course, had wished for the marriage, and had talked it over with the Squire, and had used all her influence to further it; but John resolutely declined.

Mr. Aylmer was furious; he had never believed it possible that any man would be such a fool as to reject a beautiful girl and one of the loveliest old places in England, combined with an income of many thousands a year. For the Squire, in his anger, resolved that if Judith was not to be the mistress of Aylmer's Court, neither should John be the master of it: sooner than that he would himself marry again, little as he had hitherto relished the thought of giving his beautiful wife a successor, and his daughter a step-mother. Judith felt her heart still glow with anger, as it did on that day when her father had walked with her on the terrace and had told her of

John Aylmer's answer. The sultry July sun burnt down on her and seemed to scorch her brain, as the passion within her scorched her heart. She had been spurned and rejected, she to whom men had even knelt in the hope of exciting her pity and her love. Her passionate anger burnt the youth out of her ; never again did she run along that terrace in the light gladness of girlhood. She was a woman now, and a dangerous one : her utterly uncurbed spirit had received a blow for which she was resolved to be revenged. She seconded her father's scheme of a second marriage with eagerness : she would give up being the mistress of the Court willingly to prevent John ever entering the house as master. Father and daughter together talked over their acquaintances, and selected the bride. The young lady, one of the pretty, portion-

less daughters of a neighbouring clergyman, made no objection, and the marriage took place with as little delay as possible.

The second Mrs. Aylmer could hardly have had a very warm attachment to her husband at first; but she was gentle and docile and grew fond of those who were kind to her: and her husband was especially kind to her, perhaps because he felt little of the devotion with which his first wife had inspired him. But this ill-fated bride comes across our stage for so short a time, that she seems to have left no abiding mark there: even to Judith her memory is shadowy and confused. She was regarded during her brief married life chiefly as a medium—an instrument in carrying out an idea; in this case, unhappily for her memory and most contrary to her own nature, an idea of revenge. And in this hazy light

Judith still regards her. The three lived happily enough together, especially when hopes began to be entertained that the young wife would before long fulfil her mission, and give the Squire what he so anxiously desired—an heir to Aylmer's Court.

But, one dusky February evening, came the saddest sight Judith had ever seen from the terrace. She had not gone out hunting that day; and now that it was getting dark, she had stationed herself in her favourite spot to watch for her father's return. She saw him come back, not riding his horse, but carried by grooms and workmen. The kind old Squire would never hunt again; a mistake of his horse's, a sudden slip, a heavy fall, and all was over in a moment of time—that sudden, dread launch into eternity. His daughter, even now, could

not think of that day without a shudder of agony ; she had loved her father devotedly, and with him perished all the real, true, unselfish love that had ever had possession of her heart. All his wishes were sacred to her, and she treasured up and brooded over every word, however hasty, that he had said. For his sake she devoted herself to the poor young wife, on whom the shock had, as might have been expected, a terrible effect. She lingered on till her baby was born ; then, as Judith received the child into her arms, the young mother breathed her last.

‘ Why, Judith, you’ve been pacing up and down here for about an hour !’ cried Jack’s cheery voice. ‘ My mother has been asleep, and is awake again, and that’s an affair that takes some time. And look at the moon ! when you came out she was hardly visible.’

Judith did look, she had not seen anything outward for some time ; now she saw that the clear green tint had faded away, and the sky was dark blue and brilliant silver, while terrace, gardens, and house were illuminated by the lovely light, and the trees and shadows were solemn and mysterious. As Judith turned her head, the moonlight shone full upon her face.

‘Good heavens, you look as if you had been seeing ghosts!’ exclaimed her cousin.

‘Perhaps I have,’ answered Judith.

CHAPTER V.

THE HOUSEKEEPER'S ROOM.

Two women were sitting in the comfortable housekeeper's room at Aylmer's Court, engaged in that most sociable and innocent of meals commonly called tea. The other fortunate members of the household who had the right of entrance into this conservatively guarded chamber happened on this particular occasion to be occupied elsewhere, and these two elderly females had the room to themselves. One of them might almost have been considered the proprietress of the apartment, being no other than the housekeeper herself, a tall

gaunt woman with high cheek-bones, an eager expression, and hair that had once been fiery, but was now red and silver sand in mixture. The other woman's position in life was not so clearly defined. She was called Mrs. Crosby's maid, but her real status in the family was derived from the fact that she had been Claud's nurse. She was fat and fair, as a nurse should be ; and her bearing had a good deal of the joviality that might also be expected from a woman who had successfully 'raised' the heir to a great estate, and brought him through all the troubles of infancy and the complaints of childhood, to the very verge of attaining his majority. Yet she had also some nervous tricks of manner which would hardly be looked for in a person of this type ; a way of looking startled, of blinking her eyes, and of twitching her mouth

sometimes when nothing in the commonplace remarks she had been listening to seemed to call for these demonstrations. At other times she was as natural and good-humoured an old woman as could be met with on a summer's day. This was a very pleasant summer's day, when we find them sipping their tea; they had placed, or, more correctly speaking, had ordered their little maid to place, the table close to the open window—one of the long, low windows which were the pride of Aylmer's Court; and the scent of mignonette and lavender mingled deliciously with their orange Pekoe.

‘Well,’ exclaimed Nurse, as she was still very usually called, ‘I must say as I do enjoy a good honest English cup of tea.’

‘I don’t doubt it, ma’am,’ assented the housekeeper. ‘After being so long among

foreigners, it must be a real treat. You must have got uncommon tired of them unchristian beings.'

'Oh, they had their good points, poor things!' said good-natured Nurse apologetically; 'though not like us, of course. The worst to me was, as I never could catch hold of the tongues. It was here to-day and gone to-morrow, as you may say—France, Italy, Germany; and just as I was beginning to catch hold of a tongue, off again!'

'What could have made your missis move about so?' inquired Mrs. Hankey, bending forward with rather an eager look in her colourless eyes.

'Oh, everybody does; it's the fashion,' said Nurse Baker, blinking a little. 'You soon get tired of a place abroad.'

'Ah, very likely. I never was there, so

don't know the ways of the place,' murmured the housekeeper, subduing the eagerness. 'Another cup of tea, Mrs. Baker? Is the sugar and cream to your liking? Don't spare the cream, ma'am; we've plenty of cows at Aylmer's Court, thank goodness!'

'And that's a thing as you don't get much of abroad—leastwise, not what I call cream. Anyone can see as you've plenty of Channel Islanders in the dairy here, Mrs. Hankey.'

'Plenty of them. I and the bailiff have kept a strict eye on the dairy during the young master's absence: and what a lot he has been away!' responded the housekeeper. 'Only just popped in upon us, as one may say, between one set of tenants and another. Why, it's years since he's been here—ten years at least.'

‘About that,’ said Nurse shortly.

‘It’s trying on servants and cows,’ pursued Mrs. Hankey, ‘but we tried to do our best.’

‘And have given every satisfaction,’ added Mrs. Baker generously. ‘And what was the last tenants like, Mrs. Hankey?’

‘Oh, self-made family; nothing much,’ said Mrs. Hankey, with easy condescension. Paid their way, was civil and obliging; and was uncommon sorry to leave the place, I can tell you. But had to clear out for the young master, of course.’

‘Of course,’ assented Nurse.

‘We shall have fine doings for the coming of age. The next thing will be his marriage.’

Nurse blinked, but was silent.

‘He’ll see all the young ladies at this grand ball we’re giving,’ pursued the

housekeeper. 'He may take his pick of the county.'

Still the nurse made no remark on this subject, usually so interesting to a nurse.

'I hope he haven't took up with any young person abroad?' continued Mrs. Hankey; 'which would be a sad waste of his chances.'

'Oh dear no!' exclaimed Mrs. Baker, who found her tongue suddenly; 'laws, no! He ain't that sort at all; he don't take no heed of the girls neither one way nor yet the other.'

'H'm! that's strange too, in a young fellow; they mostly like a pretty face, not to mention a little chaff, and flirting, and the like. He don't seem much like other young men, Master Claud don't.'

'What's that rustling in the bushes?'

exclaimed Nurse, with a sudden return to her nervous manner.

‘Oh, I don’t know! a cat most likely,’ responded Mrs. Hankey, rather crossly; she did not like being interrupted in the tide of her eloquence. ‘But as I was saying——’

‘Might I ask for another lump of sugar?’ interrupted Nurse once more. ‘Thank you, ma’am. I always had a sweet tooth, and it don’t diminish with old age. As for Master Claud, he has always been very much took up with his painting, which has kept nonsense out of his head—and a good thing too, at his age; he has plenty of time yet. As for other young men, I don’t know anything about them, nor don’t want to.’

‘Ah, you’ve been a long time in this family—pretty near all your life, I suppose, ma’am?’

Mrs. Hankey was turning her love of inquiry into another channel, and one much more congenial to the nurse. Which amongst us does not like talking of him or herself?

‘I have indeed, Mrs. Hankey. I’ve been with them pretty nigh all my life—ever since I was a slip of twenty—a matter of forty years ago. I was Miss Judith’s nurse, and a sweet, pretty baby she was, and just like a queen in all her ways, I can tell you; by the time she was six we minded her a deal more than my missus, her mother—aye, and the old Squire too. We all, including of her papa and mamma, knocked under to Miss Judith, she was that masterful.’

‘Well, it has surprised me many and many a time when I’ve come to think of it, how such a proud young lady—beautiful

and rich too, as I've heard she was—should have took up with and married a country surgeon like Dr. Crosby. I was in his service at the time, as you know, Mrs. Baker, though I hadn't the pleasure of being acquainted with you then, the servants at the surgery being hardly on visiting terms with them at the Court, not to mention its being four miles distant; but I give you my word, Mrs. Baker, we all of us—meaning cook and me, which was all there was, for I don't count the errand-boy—we was struck dumb with astonishment when we heard of *that* match. She, with her pride and her beauty and her old family, and he—a country surgeon!

'Ah!' said Mrs. Baker guardedly, 'one can't always account for such things.'

'It isn't even as if he was handsome to look at; he was nothing particular,' pur-

sued the housekeeper. 'Nor clever—not as I ever heard of.'

'Well, you aren't very grateful,' observed Nurse, 'considering it was him got you the place of housekeeper here; he was kind to you, anyway.'

The housekeeper did not seem to relish this last remark; she looked keenly at Mrs. Baker, whose fat face was totally innocent of any particular expression: yet inanity does not always imply unconsciousness, and Mrs. Hankey felt uncertain as to the amount of the nurse's power of intuition. Of positive knowledge on the part of Mrs. Baker, the housekeeper might, if she had considered calmly for a moment, have felt sure that there could be absolutely none. How could anyone know the hidden secrets of her life, when she had never confided in anyone? Yet it was true that she had

meant that the wife of Dr. Crosby should be a very different person from Judith Aylmer ; and it is always difficult to believe that other people can be totally ignorant of any fact of which we ourselves are vividly aware. Uncertainty is a most unpleasant phase of mind, so it is scarcely necessary to add that she resented the nurse's chance observation considerably more than the occasion warranted.

‘ Grateful ! I don’t know what you mean by grateful, Mrs. Baker. I was a good servant, and I’ve got a good place, and they’ve quite as much call to be grateful to me as me to them. I don’t see any reason to go down on my knees about that. As for the doctor’s kindness, I don’t consider it anything particular that when his own household was broke up, he gave me a good character and got me a good place. I don’t

deny as it was a step upstairs ; but no more than I had a right to expect after the care I'd took of his house—and him too, for the matter of that. I'll be bound I made him a deal more comfortable than his fine lady-wife ever did ; he didn't live long in his grandeur, anyway : so I should just like you to tell me, Mrs. Baker, where the kindness came in ?'

'Dear, dear ! I'm sure I'm very sorry,' murmured the nurse, rather astonished at this outburst. 'You've given as good as you've got, certainly ; and I beg to assure you as no offence was meant.'

'And none taken,' added Mrs. Hankey, who felt already that she had spoken unadvisedly in her haste. 'Help yourself to the muffin, Mrs. Baker. What was we observing ? Oh, about your young lady's marriage. If she'd been a bit older, one

would have said it was a case of any, any.'

'What do you mean by "any, any"?' asked Nurse, prepared to act on the defensive, unmollified by buttered muffin.

'Why, anyone for a husband, of course, my dear. It really looked very much like that with Miss Judith—as if she was determined to be married.'

'How can you say such a thing?' cried Nurse wrathfully, roused at last. 'Determined to be married, indeed!—as if there wasn't dozens as would have gone on their bended knees to her if she'd have looked at them. No; there was very different reasons from that, I can tell you.'

'Nurse!' A voice from the garden startled the hearers as much as a pebble coming through the window would have done—a voice cold and clear as crystal.

‘I am sorry to interrupt your chat, but if you have done your tea, I want you in my room for a few moments.’

And Mrs. Crosby walked slowly away from the window in the direction of the hall-door, carrying the bunch of lavender which she had just picked from the bushes that grew in the old-fashioned border which ran along beneath the windows of that wing of the house where the servants’ rooms were situated.

Nurse hurried, without more words, to the luxurious rooms which had been set apart for Mrs. Crosby, who loved the velvets and laces of life more as outward signs of power than because she absolutely cared much for softness or beauty. Yet her dark eyes would have looked more sternly dissatisfied with fate, had her surroundings been devoid of the splendour

and luxury which she demanded without seeming to prize. Nurse's fat and wavering feet consequently sunk into carpets and rugs of dusky richness, though it must be allowed that the feet themselves were encased in elastic-sided boots, low at the ankle and baggy at the sides ; her good-natured face, which blinked and twitched at the present moment, stood out against a background of pale-toned beauty, and her frightened eyes saw her figure—not remarkable for loveliness amid so many lovely things—reflected in the soft sheen of mirrors, not staring and glaring as mirrors often are, but in the subdued light of this room revealing depths of beauty and colour that might otherwise have passed unnoticed.

Nurse put aside one of the silken Eastern hangings of a window, and fumbled nervously

in her pocket for her spectacles, while she tried to reassure herself by believing that her mistress had only required her attendance for the purpose of renewing the lisse in a dinner-dress, or some equally trivial matter. One glance at Mrs. Crosby's face, as she entered, dispelled this comforting illusion. She came in quietly—she always moved quietly—but the expression of her face struck terror to the old woman's soul, and made her drop her spectacles and clutch the curtain tightly, while she blinked more furiously than ever. Her mistress's words were few—Judith never wasted words :

‘ You chattering fool ! ’ she said, in a low, concentrated voice. ‘ As you haven't learnt how to hold your tongue after twenty years of practice, I shall send you back to Florence.’

CHAPTER VI.

SALLY.

JACK and Claud had been inspecting the stables—a range of well-designed buildings, greatly improved and added to by the late Squire, who gloried in them openly. A man more free from pride in a general way it would have been hard to find, but he was palpably proud of his stables.

‘It’s a pity to see these stalls filled by hired beasts,’ observed Jack, looking at the rather weedy carriage-horses who reposed there, in an equine Elysium, with pitying contempt. ‘Claud, you’ll have to bestir yourself, and look out for some horses

worth having. Perhaps you might get along with these for another month or two till the end of the season, and then I should advise you to run up to town and have a look at Tattersall's—for your carriage-horses, I mean ; but something decent to ride you want at once.'

'Yes, of course,' assented Claud. 'I wish you would undertake it, Jack. I don't know anything about the value of horses. You are fond of riding, and I should like you to choose for yourself.'

'But, my dear boy, I don't want you to buy horses for me to ride,' remonstrated Major Aylmer, as they strolled round the house towards the terrace. 'You don't mean to say that you hold by Judith's idea—that you don't care to ride, because your father met with a fatal accident?'

‘It is not exactly that,’ said Claud, in a rather hesitating way.

‘I’m glad to hear you say that,’ returned Jack heartily. ‘I thought it couldn’t be. You are too like your father not to have inherited his tastes; and his chief taste, by a long way, was for hunting. And, now I come to think of it, I remember you rode when you were a little boy; and uncommonly pluckily, too.’

‘I hope, if I rode at all, I rode pluckily,’ said Claud; ‘but I don’t care about riding now—at least, that is to say, I—I don’t intend to ride any more.’

‘As you please.’

Jack was sorely puzzled by this boy; but once more he put it all down to Judith—she had made the boy promise, no doubt.

‘Very absurd of her—never thought

Judith had those absurd fancies. She used to ride herself after her father's death, I know ; and it isn't as if she were wrapped up in the boy : I don't believe they care a rap about each other, really.'

These, of course, were Major Aylmer's mental musings, as he puffed rather savagely at his cigar while they lounged on the terrace. He was vexed that the last of the Aylmers should be missing from the covert-side and unseen in the hunting-field, especially as he felt convinced that the boy would give his eyes to be there. Claud was modest, but there was nothing about him that suggested a want of pluck. Claud was sitting on the balustrade, occupied in rolling up cigarettes ; but there was a strangely pained look on his face, and he seemed hesitating whether to speak or not. At last he made up his mind, and spoke :

‘Jack, I want to ask you some questions, if you don’t mind.’

‘Not at all, provided they are not too abstruse. You’ll soon get to the end of my stock of knowledge, not being by any means a walking encyclopædia,’ replied Jack, restored to good-humour.

‘My questions are not abstruse,’ replied Claud, with some anxiety and eagerness in his face. ‘I only want to know what the code of honour is among men of the world.’

‘Good Lord!’ ejaculated Major Aylmer; ‘you haven’t been getting into any scrapes—have you?’

Claud laughed, and flushed brightly, while he denied the imputation.

‘It’s not that,’ he said. ‘I only want to know what men—Englishmen, men like yourself—think about things.’

‘Oh—ah! Having been brought up among foreigners and women—I see.’ Jack evidently put foreigners and women in the same class in the school of honour—the lowest. ‘But what things, my boy?’

‘First of all, about truth.’

‘My dear fellow, if you want an abstract ethical description of truth from me, I’m afraid I can’t oblige you—I couldn’t do it, you know.’

‘Oh, it isn’t that!’ said Claud hastily. ‘I don’t want religious truths, or philosophic truths. This is practical. Must a man always, at whatever cost to himself, tell the whole truth about everything?’

‘Of course he must,’ answered Jack, with energy; and then he paused for a moment, and hesitated. The boy was so young—so very young for his years—he did not wish to suggest any unpleasant

ideas to him ; and still, when the question was truth, he scarcely liked to tamper with or suppress any part of it, so he went on with some reluctance : ‘ Yes, of course. A man must tell the truth always, except sometimes in very exceptional circumstances.’

‘ Oh, then there are exceptional circumstances?’ queried Claud.

‘ Well, perhaps—to save a woman, it is excusable to tell a lie,’ owned Jack, pushed into a corner.

‘ Ah, then it is excusable to tell a lie—to save a woman,’ mused Claud.

‘ My dear boy,’ said Jack, looking full at him, in some astonishment, ‘ what can you mean by asking such questions? You haven’t been falling in love with a married woman? I trust devoutly that you haven’t—you are too young for such rubbish.’

‘Rubbish at any age!’ returned Claud hotly. ‘Jack, can’t there be a question without love getting mixed up in it? There was nothing of the sort in my mind, I can assure you.’

‘I am glad to hear it—thought you might have picked up some nonsense in Italy,’ returned Jack, rather incoherently.

‘It is because I was brought up in Italy that I ask; perhaps they don’t think so very much of truth out there—of truth as truth you know, loved for its own sake—and which is, I suppose, as the air he breathes to an English gentleman.’

‘That is what it should be, certainly,’ admitted Jack.

‘And an English child gasps sometimes for lack of that air,’ said Claud.

‘I am afraid Judith has been going it,’ mused Jack. ‘What a beastly shame!—

the boy seems straightforward, in spite of it.'

'Can you imagine anything more intolerable than for a child—an English child, who had inherited truthful instincts, to be brought up in an atmosphere of falsehood—with a soul always striving after truth, always to be thrust back again and forced to live a lie?'

'Claud!' cried the voice of Judith from the open drawing-room window. 'Claud! will you get me a few more Gloire de Dijon roses? I haven't quite enough to fill this vase.'

Claud obeyed, rather unwillingly; and while he was gone, a brilliant idea dawned upon Jack.

'Bless my soul, I do believe I have it!' he mentally ejaculated. 'What an infernal shame of Judith not to look after him

better! The boy has evidently got something on his mind: I do believe some priest has got hold of him and turned him into a Papist, and he thinks he ought to tell us.'

So when Claud returned to his seat and his cigarettes, Jack, removing his cigar, proceeded to deliver the judgment which had been asked for, and which he had founded on this new and startling theory.

'I've been thinking over what you've said, old man: it is clear you have something on your mind; but if you'll take my advice, you'll do nothing at all for the present. Wait a bit, and perhaps it will pass off. There is no knowing; in a different atmosphere, you know.' Jack thought he had reproduced Claud's metaphor rather neatly. 'I would wait a bit, if I were you, and see how things appear to you at the

end of a few months. No good to make a fuss now, just before the festivities; and you may change your mind, you know. You are only an infant now in the eye of the law: wait till you are grown up, at all events.'

Claud looked in rather a startled way at his cousin, wondering what could be the root of this very unexpected advice; but Jack's face told little.

'Is that your advice then, Jack—your deliberate advice? Not to speak—to wait and think about it?' he asked quietly.

'Certainly,' returned Jack; 'don't speak in a hurry and repent at leisure.'

'I will take your advice, but remember always that it was your advice. Jack, I will wait—at all events till I am of age.'

'Yes, do, and longer if possible. The longer the better, I should say,' assented

John Alymer cheerfully. 'Hallo! there's a carriage coming up the drive. The Brands, for a thousand pounds! Yes, I recognise their bony old grey. Didn't I tell you, you wouldn't have long to wait?

'I wasn't at all impatient,' said Claud.

'Well, then, you ought to be,' returned Jack, lazily watching the progress of the carriage, a small brougham, drawn by a leggy grey with its head well up in the air rather after the manner of a camel. 'They're coming in their war-chariots and war-paint to call on Judith; on ordinary week-days, so to speak, Sally runs across in her little high-heeled shoes by a short cut which makes their house not a mile off—it's just across the park over there. They've come a round of two or three miles in order to drive in at the lodge gates and do honour

to the occasion—and Judith, who I hope will respond.'

'Judith doesn't care for fast girls,' replied Claud.

'My dear Claud, why will you imagine that Miss Brand is fast? On the contrary, she is slow, and demure; wait till you hear her talk. But you mustn't expect to see a great beauty; she isn't that in the least; she is only an awfully nice little girl. I don't expect she'll look half as nice to-day as usual: war-paint doesn't suit Sally—she is simply charming in her common or garden clothes, pretending to be rustic.'

'Is it necessary for me to appear?' asked Claud, with a manner that seemed to meditate escape.

'Necessary! of course it is. They've seen you on the terrace. Why, Claud,

what a queer boy you are ! you must have left your heart in Italy with some dark-eyed donzella.'

'Not I,' said Claud. 'Anyone more absolutely heart-whole than myself it would be hard to find anywhere.'

'You'd better wait till you've seen the girls about here before you indulge in that same confident boasting,' said Jack warningly. 'Bet you a shilling you'll be head over ears in love before the end of three months.'

'Done !' laughed Claud. 'What makes you magnify a danger which you have escaped yourself ?'

'But I haven't escaped it. I have been head over ears scores of times. In fact, my heart is so thoroughly riddled by Cupid's darts, that it's no more capable of containing a serious passion now than a sieve

is of holding water. Come along, and be introduced to Sarah and her parent.'

But at this moment the young lady herself, accompanied by Judith, came from the drawing-room on to the terrace.

'It is so much pleasanter out-of-doors than in the house to-day, that Miss Brand and I are going to establish ourselves in the sunshine for a little,' said Judith graciously, and then proceeded to make the necessary introduction.

Sally courtesied demurely, and in rather an old-fashioned manner, to Claud, extending a small but cordial hand to Jack. As she did so, she directed a swift glance at the young heir of Aylmer's Court, so swift as to be almost imperceptible.

'Shy boy ; hate boys !' was her inward comment.

Outwardly she said nothing. She was

dressed simply, but in a picturesque way, with no trace of war-paint. She was small and slight, with dark hair and eyes, her little features were by no means regular; but she was quaint, and, in her own way, charming.

‘Miss Brand, we want your assistance awfully,’ began Jack, with the ease of old acquaintancé. ‘You know my cousin comes of age shortly, and we hardly feel equal to the occasion.’

‘You want to make merry, and don’t know where to begin,’ suggested Miss Brand.

‘Exactly. It’s just what I used to feel about a drawing,’ owned Major Aylmer. ‘It was no use fellows talking to me about the right eye, I didn’t know where to put it. Now if you’ll commence the work, sketch in the eyes and nose and mouth,

and all that, we'll do the rough work, and fill in your ideas.'

'Am I a "guide to entertaining evenings, or handbook of select amusements"?' asked Sally.

Jack laughed and turned to his cousin.

'I assure you Miss Brand is all that, and a great deal more; and it will be awfully kind of her to take us in hand.'

'I hope Miss Brand will allow herself to be installed as Queen of the Revels,' said Claud, not very cordially.

'Certainly, with pleasure,' answered Sally amiably, 'if it is not considered absolutely necessary to stand in the middle of a bush with a black face, or to get up early in the morning.'

'Why, you've got hold of a mixture of a Jack-in-the-bush and a Queen of the

May,' announced Major Aylmer, with a chuckle.

'Recognised leaders of fêtes,' said Sally ;
'I don't know any other model.'

Mrs. Crosby had strolled to the edge of the terrace, and, her dress having accidentally or otherwise become entangled in a rose-bush, which had climbed over the balustrade and swung its lovely flowers where they had no business to be, a triumph of nature over neatness, she called Jack to her assistance. Perhaps she wished the two young people to 'make friends' quickly, *i.e.* by themselves ; perhaps she wished to take Jack out of the way. She was a woman who usually had motives for what she did ; one of the reasons, perhaps, which made her somewhat fatiguing to live with.

Sarah felt aggrieved at being left to

entertain 'a horrid stiff boy,' still she was a young woman accustomed to make the best of everything ; and after all, Claud, though not half as nice as Jack, was the heir of Aylmer's Court. So she folded her arms demurely, and gave him a deprecating glance.

'Don't you think we might sit down on the wall?' she asked suavely.

'I think we might, certainly,' assented Claud, as they moved towards the balustrade, at a little distance from the spot where Jack was pricking his fingers and exercising his patience. A little brown lizard came out of his lurking-place, gazed at Claud and Sally for an instant, and then scuttled away. 'I'm glad there are lizards here,' said Claud absently, and with a half sigh ; 'they remind me of Italy.'

'Do you regret Italy so much?' asked

Sally, responding to the sigh, while across her mind there floated the vision of a dark-eyed donzella which had appeared to Jack.

‘Not at all ; one place is very much the same to me as another,’ said Claud prosaically. ‘Nothing could well be more beautiful than the view from this terrace.’ He seemed to be unaware that he was praising his own property.

‘Nothing conduces more to the contentment of a well-regulated mind than a due appreciation of its own surroundings,’ observed Sally grandiloquently.

‘You must excuse me ; I wasn’t thinking of what I was saying,’ said Claud, getting rather red. ‘I’m afraid you’ll find me horribly absent, Miss Brand. I am not accustomed to being monarch of all I survey, you see, having never lived on my own land or even in my own country ;

but the beauty of a place belongs to those who can appreciate it, not to those to whom the rents happen to be paid. The loveliness of Italy was mine just as much as the beauty of this place is ; and will be, even though I ceased to be the owner of it.'

Sally gazed at him in speechless surprise. It seemed to be Claud's fate to waken an astonishment—usually unpleasing—in the eyes of all who came across him. 'Not shy,' thought Sally ; ' prig—worse. Thinks me flippant, too.'

At this moment Jack came up to them, having been delivered from the rose-tree and Judith, who had been summoned into the drawing-room, more visitors and tea having arrived.

'Is it permitted ?' he asked, seating himself on the wall beside Sally. 'Do you

know, Miss Brand, it would be most awfully Christian of you to hold that sunshade over my head. I have been disentangling my cousin with the sun on my head and thorns in my hands ; a serious illness may be the result if you don't take care of me.'

'Do you think it is my mission in life to hold an umbrella over you till death us do part ?' inquired Sally, with slow anxiety. She always spoke slowly, and in a little gentle voice that was never raised under any provocation.

'I wish it were ; no such luck for me,' responded Major Aylmer politely. 'Well, what have you two settled about the festive doings ?'

'Nothing,' replied Miss Brand briefly.

'Jack, there are a whole lot of people in the drawing-room,' observed Claud ; 'I

ought to go and help Judith with them and the tea.'

'Do,' replied Major Aylmer, 'and bring us some out here, there's a good fellow ; you don't look happy when you're idle.'

'You do, Major Aylmer,' remarked Sally, glancing at him as he lounged against a stone pedestal and vase, greatly to the destruction of the creeping-plants which adorned it.

'Do I? I look what I feel, then. It's a great thing to know when you are happy. I believe that is just the thing that all the philosophers missed ; they went mooning all over the place looking for happiness and coming to no conclusion : if they would have sat about in the sunshine, with you to hold a sunshade over them, they would have known all about it.'

'Thank you ; I shouldn't,' said Sally.

‘What a queer boy your cousin is, Major Aylmer!’

‘He is an awfully good fellow when you know him,’ said the loyal Major; ‘strangers don’t take to him at first—brought up abroad, you know. But you’ll be great friends before long, I expect. Now, about the ball—shall it be on the auspicious day?’

‘The eve of it, and then it will be ushered in nicely; supper at twelve, and champagne, don’t you know. Oh, Mr. Aylmer,’ continued Sally, as Claud approached with her tea, ‘do let it be a fancy ball! The people about here are so stupid: do you know, I have never been to a fancy ball; there has not been one for years—not since I have been out.’

‘At least a quarter of a century,’ observed Jack.

‘Certainly it shall be a fancy ball, if you wish it,’ answered Claud, as he betook himself back to his social duties in the drawing-room.

‘He *is* good-natured,’ admitted Sally, ‘but laconic. Does he never laugh? Was he born old?’

‘Old! why, Claud strikes me as being so particularly young,’ said his cousin; ‘almost more a child than a young man. Doesn’t trust his own judgment, you know, even about horses, and that’s a subject most fellows think they understand.’

‘Doesn’t he?’ said Sally doubtfully; ‘he seemed to me to have settled convictions. Only about things we don’t trouble our heads about.’

‘Ah, that struck you, too?’ said Jack, with some anxiety, and suddenly sitting up. ‘Well, we must hope he’ll get over

that. We must amuse him—give him something to think of, you know.’

At this moment their confidential discourse was interrupted by Miss Brand’s mamma, a formidable-looking dame, who considered that this *tête-à-tête* with an ineligible had been very unduly prolonged.

‘Sara!’ she ejaculated in a bitter-sweet voice, the artificial sweet barely disguising the natural acidity, and pronouncing the name of her daughter almost as the name of the desert, the best she could make of this terrible prefix, which the late Mr. Brand had insisted on bestowing on his daughter, in defiance of her wishes. ‘Sara, come in out of the sun, my child; you’ll be having sunstroke or brain fever if you are so incautious.’

CHAPTER VII.

THE DUTCH GARDEN.

VISITORS increased and multiplied at Aylmer's Court, until everybody who was anybody had called. Of these a selected portion were asked to stay in the house over the festive period, while the remainder were invited to the separate entertainments—the ball, the sports, and the theatricals—for there were to be theatricals at Sally's special entreaty. She had a genius for impersonation, and she knew it; she felt that she could be an actress if she had only the chance; hitherto her opportunities had been of the scantiest. An impromptu charade,

‘so much pleasanter than pre-arranged, made-up things, don’t you know,’ in which everyone talked and moved—when they talked and moved at all—in an independent and irrelevant manner, each carrying out his own ideas, and assisting in producing chaos. More often still they simply stuck. An actress by nature like little Sally, small and slow, could have made some good effects if she had been given time and space; but her ideas were simply jostled out of her in the rushing and shouting that passed for wit. She described her sufferings pathetically to Jack, while she entreated him to use his influence in favour of regular plays ‘without any bounding about. Major Aylmer, it was *horrid*. I never got to the end of a single sentence. One maniac had to bring in the word “no,” so he kept bouncing in and out, shrieking “No, I

won't," to everything. There wasn't much difficulty in guessing the word. Mrs. Aylmer charitably thought it might be "won't;" but as that syllable doesn't occur in any word in any known language, nobody seconded her. Do let us have something sensible; let me be able to say a whole sentence at a time without being in bodily fear.'

When Sally condescended to plead, which was not often, she invariably got her own way. The only stipulation that was made was that she should take the responsibility, choose the plays and the players, and distribute the parts. Sally did not shirk responsibility, she rather liked it, and would have commanded an Arctic or any other expedition with coolness and presence of mind. But nothing was settled as yet; Miss Brand had not decided what she

wanted ; when she did she would be prompt and decided enough, and would carry it through with spirit ; but she liked to be quite certain what her own wishes were before trying to impose them on other people.

In the meantime the hired horses were having rather a bad time of it, Mrs. Aylmer and Judith having to drive about in every direction returning their neighbours' civilities ; and invitations of every kind came pouring in, most of which were declined, Claud caring little for society, and being, as his sister said, a most unsociable boy. He spent most of his time in walking over his farms with sometimes his bailiff, sometimes an agent, in attendance ; but invariably his cousin John Aylmer accompanied him at his special request, and he would agree to no alterations or improvements of any

kind without asking for his cousin's advice and approval. The tenants commented on this, and did not understand it ; the bailiff and agents signally disapproved of it. Jack himself thought it a mistake, though he was too good-natured not to respond to his cousin's appeals ; and Sarah Brand mentally revoked her opinion as to Claud's age, and called him—strictly to herself—‘ the baby,’ while Jack received the cognomen of ‘ nurse.’ Major Aylmer was very happy and contented with the state of life assigned to him by Providence ; he was not jealous by nature, and did not compare his cousin's lot and his own, in spite of Judith's obvious efforts to make him do so. He had a sincere liking for the boy, and when he failed to understand him—which was frequently—he set down the circumstance to his own stupidity and to foreign influences. Claud had bought

some fine horses, one of which was entirely at the Major's disposal; another the young heir used to drive to his outlying farms, up and down break-neck lanes, and frequently through fields and other places very detrimental to the springs of his dog-cart. He drove with great nerve and judgment, and proved that the Aylmer hereditary 'pluck' was not wanting in him. His humour at this time was very variable; at one time gay almost to recklessness, at another melancholy and almost despairing. He said nothing about his feelings: he asked his cousin no more questions; but he looked at him sometimes with an earnestness that disconcerted Jack and perplexed him greatly.

'If he has scruples,' said Jack, 'what is the good of looking at me? I haven't any.'

No one who loved the boy could fail to see that he had something—and something serious—on his mind. But Jack had his own theory. Mrs. Aylmer and others put it down to a love affair, and the lad had no devoted mother to watch him and give him help. Judith, who stood in the place of that parent, was very much annoyed by his conduct. She was angry and out of humour altogether. She had meant to manage the course of events, and the course of events seemed likely to manage her, or, at least, to be too strong for her. Jack and Claud were always together, and she saw little of either ; she was left to the society of that tiresome old woman, as she mentally called her dear Aunt Aylmer : these were annoyances, she had also keen anxieties, and Claud, who should have been her ally, was no help to her ; he was, in

fact, the chief cause of her anxiety. It would be a relief to her when the house was full of people next week, when Claud and Jack must attend to their guests, and could not be so constantly together, getting firmer friends every hour, when she should no longer be tormented by the sight of her brother's pale face, or frightened by the look of resolve that seemed growing in his eyes. He avoided her, too; he was scarcely ever alone with her. Little as she cared for young ladies of the Sarah Brand stamp, it would be quite a boon to her when the girl would come and absorb the attention of that great foolish Jack, taking him away from Claud — anything to separate the cousins. She thought rightly enough that Sally would have a much better chance of effecting this than she herself would have. Jack avoided her as much as Claud did; her

short-lived idea of fascinating him even now, had faded away, and the lifelong hatred of the man who had scorned her returned in full force.

She was looking her life in the face sternly, and with unflinching courage, as she walked in the old garden at the Court. This was situated on the other side of the house from the terrace, and had been planned and made when the house was first built; it was a very charming old garden, laid out in the Dutch style, with high box hedges, trees cut to imitate peacocks and other quaint devices, sweet old-fashioned flowers, and a general old-world fragrance. The bees were kept here, and one side of the garden—that farthest from the house—ended in a bowling-green, converted in these later days into tennis-courts. No one was playing that popular

game at this moment though, and the garden also seemed deserted as Judith paced up and down its walks, with bent head and frowning brows. Suddenly, as she turned into a side alley, she came upon Claud, like herself immersed in thought—and painful thought. The sight did not seem to soothe her.

‘Claud, if you had only a skull, you might pose for Hamlet,’ she said, and there was more asperity than raillery in her tone.

‘Hamlet could hardly have felt more bitterly the difficulties of his position than I do. He had a sudden and sharp awakening, and I have had a slow one—that is all.’

‘An awakening—what do you mean?’ asked Judith sharply, but not as firmly as she could have wished.

‘An awakening to the falseness of those who have brought you up from infancy must be bitter with an exceeding bitterness,’ said Claud grimly.

‘Thank you,’ said Judith.

She was so angry she could scarcely speak.

‘I remember, when I was a child, I believed so implicitly in all grown-up people. I thought they could do no wrong. The fruit of the tree of knowledge in this case has been bitter as gall. What a young fool I was—but happy in my folly! I believed in truth, and uprightness, and honour. I believed in you, Judith, most implicitly.’

‘Go on,’ said Judith, between her teeth. ‘Wouldn’t you like to proclaim all this from the house-top?’

‘I believed in Dr. Crosby, too, and in

Nurse Baker. It was a very thorough awakening, was it not ? But perhaps the nurse could hardly help herself. By-the-way, Judith, the old woman says you mean to send her back to Florence. She shall not go. She shall stay here till over my birthday, at all events.'

'Very well. I have listened to you, and now you shall listen to me. What do you mean by this idiotic folly, Claud? If you mean to speak—well, speak ; but of your own accord, of your own free will. If you go on as you are doing now you will simply betray yourself ; where is the high-mindedness of being found out? If you want to behave like Don Quixote, there are plenty of ways of doing it without any scandal or fuss. In the event of your death, the estate goes to John Aylmer.'

There was something very petrifying in

the low, calm voice with which Judith said these words. Claud's young, fresh face grew rigid as he listened.

'But think over it, Claud, and give yourself a chance. Whichever way you decide, do not betray yourself by these moody airs; there is no occasion for it. You have always an alternative. But the home of our ancestors is worth a sacrifice. Look up at it, Claud; is it not fair in your eyes—is it not dear to you?'

'God knows it is!' said the boy, as he raised wistful eyes to the house, the sweet old garden, and the lovely park beyond.

'It was our father's wish that it should come to you, and his wishes are sacred—in my eyes at least.'

At this moment a slight, a very slight rustle attracted Judith's attention; her ears, like all her other senses, were quick at all

times, but they seemed almost preternaturally acute just now. A bird or a cat on the other side of the hedge would have made just such a rustle; but Judith paused suddenly in her discourse and walked rapidly to the end of the walk, where she could command a view of the farther side of the box hedge. A woman, tall and slight, with red hair turning grey, was walking up this path, stooping occasionally to pick a flower.

‘Mrs. Hankey,’ said Judith, in a voice of well-bred but extreme surprise. ‘What are you doing here?’

The housekeeper turned and answered respectfully.

‘I beg your pardon, madam. I did not know you were in the garden or I would not have intruded. We were rather short

of flowers—the gardeners never bring in enough—so I came to pick a few myself.

‘Certainly,’ said Judith amiably. ‘Mr. Claud and I have done rehearsing. You needn’t hurry away. We are going on to the tennis-ground now.’

CHAPTER VIII.

MRS. AYLMER REMONSTRATES.

THE expected guests had assembled at Aylmer's Court ; bright forms glittered in and out among shrubs and flowers, stately ladies strolled on the terrace, gay young voices were heard on the tennis-ground, and the old place looked once more as it had done many a time in the olden days before the Stuart troubles began. Now, indeed, might frequently be heard scraps of rehearsals by night and day in the most unexpected places ; and anyone sauntering in the Dutch garden might have been surprised at the revelations he overheard and

the seemingly tender episodes he interrupted. Had Mrs. Hankey been walking there now, perhaps she might have believed Judith's explanation. Not that Mrs. Crosby took any part in the theatricals; as mistress of the house she had other things to attend to, notably the entertainment of the more elderly and important guests; besides which she was a woman to whom the art of impersonation did not come naturally, as it does to so many. She lived intensely, and her mind and soul were occupied with her own life and her own plans. She did not enter readily into the feelings of others or look at men and things from out the windows of others' souls, and she had a very slight appreciation of humour. Hence it follows that, though a clever and a beautiful woman, she would have made an indifferent actress;

and she had the wit to be quite aware of the fact. Sarah Brand, on the contrary, was so responsive, that, as she sometimes owned, she found it easier to act a part than to be simply herself. With far too many faults to be in the least angelic, even in the eyes of an adorer, she was so essentially sympathetic that she could not help identifying herself with the ideal which you had formed of her; Sally was for the time-being all that you imagined her to be, which was probably the secret of her popularity. Her small face possessed the faculty of expressing emotion almost before her brain had conceived it, and her little figure quivered in unison with her face. Nine times out of ten she had no wish to deceive, and yet even in private life it was almost physically impossible for her not to act a part. And so, her little irregular features

which could light up suddenly, her eyes where tears lurked, and her rosy mouth made for smiles, had proved more destructive to manly hearts than the statuesque loveliness of the beauties of the county.

One of Sarah's victims was now staying at the Court—an æsthetic youth—a member of the family who had made Mrs. Aylmer a disciple to culture in her old age. The father, mother, and sister were also among the guests, all equally enamoured of art and Aylmer's Court, culture and Claud.

In spite of Sally's persuasions, backed by Judith's wishes, Claud resolutely declined taking part in the play ; so the rejected *rôle* was offered to the victim, who accepted it with avidity.

His name was the terribly Philistine one of Henry Johnson. If it had even been Jones, he could have borne it better, for he

might have posed as a relation of Burne's ; but Johnson is a very unmalleable sort of appellation—the vowels are unalterable, the consonants unmanageable.

He was, as Major Aylmer said, not a bad-looking boy if he would only have cut his hair, a description of his bodily appearance which would have disgusted the youth as much as Jack's appreciation of his mental powers, briefly expressed to the effect that he did not hold him to be such a fool as he looked.

He was, in fact, what so many æsthetes are not—a very tolerable artist ; and, of course, Sally, like a true theatrical manager, had availed herself of this fact, and of her ascendancy over him, to make him paint the scenery for her play. It went bitterly against his soul—it was a style of art most absolutely repulsive to all the higher feel-

ings of his nature ; but Sally pleading was irresistible, and soul and nature had to give way.

Miss Brand had, in truth, had endless trouble about these theatricals. What manager ever existed who has not had to go through every phase of misfortune expected and unexpected — the looked-for quarrels, jealousies, and ultra and inconvenient modesty—the unlooked-for colds, illnesses, business telegrams which require immediate departure, and sometimes inopportune love-affairs? Sarah, however, steered her way with tact and temper through all difficulties. She was of a sanguine nature, and took life easily ; and though, owing to misfortunes and inability —the principal performers having been summoned away, and the others being utterly unable to grapple with their parts

—the chief play had to be given up, Sally did not lose heart, or confess to having arrived at the end of her resources. As a matter of fact, she had not. These halting histrionics she resolved to turn into wax-works, greatly to the relief of most of them ; while Jack, Harry Johnson, and herself could be counted on safely, she thought, in a small play, as a finish to the entertainment.

‘Call no play safe until it is played,’ would be an addition to homely proverbs ; and might have been used even in this case, where Sally could certainly rely on herself, where Harry had accepted his part with enthusiasm, and Jack with modesty, being, as he said, an awful duffer at this sort of game ; but still, modest or not, when Jack said he would do a thing, he invariably did it, and so the successful

result of this Rule of Three seemed to be beyond a doubt.

‘I’ll tell you what,’ he remarked to Sally, in one of their frequent consultations — for if the young lady was the manager, Jack was Master of the Ceremonies, Lord Chamberlain, Arranger of the Revels, and several other offices in one, Claud having quietly placed it all in his hands—‘I’ll tell you what : we must put the Miss Bartons into the waxworks ; and it strikes me they’d do uncommonly well for the three Graces.’

‘But, my dear Jack, the costume!’ remonstrated Mrs. Aylmer, who had overheard the suggestion.

‘Classic,’ pronounced Sally shortly. ‘They are very pretty and graceful. Yes ; I think it would do.’

‘I am always sorry for those girls,’

purred Mrs. Aylmer. 'It must be so confusing. For my part, I can't imagine how any man could fall in love with one of them without falling in love with all three; and then how could he tell which was the right one?'

'Nature has evidently designed Miss Johnson for Queen Elizabeth,' said Jack, ignoring this interesting psychological question.

Miss Johnson was the artist's sister, æsthetic herself, and chiefly remarkable for her wonderful gowns, and her scarlet hair, eye-brows, and eye-lashes, which gave a fierce look to her otherwise quiet and in-offensive face.

'And the Baron for Henry VIII.,' said Sally. The Baron von Lehrenberg was a somewhat corpulent German, a foreign friend of Judith's.

‘Why not let Claud take that part?’ asked Mrs. Aylmer, following vaguely what had been said, and speaking reproachfully. ‘You really must not overlook Claud; he is such a quiet boy. But it is he who comes of age, not any of us; he ought to have a nice part.’

‘Good heavens, mother!’ cried Jack. ‘Haven’t we been begging and beseeching Claud all the time to come and help us, but in vain? Even Miss Brand has failed.’

‘Mr. Aylmer must like to “make himself prayed” to an unusual degree if he has only been hanging back all this time,’ said Miss Brand.

‘Try him yourself, mother,’ said Jack. ‘Perhaps your eloquence will prevail.’

‘I shall, my dear—in fact, there are several things I want to talk over with

Claud. I fancy we have sympathetic natures. He has the artist's soul, don't you know, even in the tips of his fingers, though he doesn't seem to care for drawing or anything much.'

And the kind little lady trotted off in search of Claud, thinking that the boy was perhaps pushed on one side by more vigorous natures, and feeling that she would much prefer seeing all the young people happy, though she knew that, æsthetically speaking, this vague melancholy was soul-satisfying. She had long ago forgiven this child, whose birth had ousted her own son from his position of heir: in fact, anger and bitterness had never at any time of her life made a home in her gentle breast.

She found Claud alone in a path near the tennis-courts: he had set his guests to

play, and had then strolled on towards the shrubberies, where, though he was still within sight and sound of the players, he was virtually alone. He was looking out, as he so often did, to the far-off blue hills, with a look in his eyes as of one who longs for and meditates escape.

‘My dear boy, why are you here all alone?’ asked the old lady, as Claud turned to meet her.

‘Oh, they’ve made up some capital sets; they don’t want me,’ said Claud.

‘But, my dear boy, they do want you; that’s just what I’ve come to tell you. Jack and Sally——’

‘I’m sure Jack and Sally don’t want me,’ interrupted Claud, with a ghost of a smile.

‘But they do, my dear. They’ve got such a nice part for you—I don’t quite re-

member what it is, but something suitable, I know.'

'Thanks, no. I like wandering about this old place and taking in this view, for instance, better than indulging in play-books and rehearsals.'

'This view is quite too exquisitely lovely,' admitted Mrs. Aylmer. 'An artist-soul finds life and—and food in it. But, my dear, if that is your fancy, there is the scenery.'

'My dear aunt, I prefer lights and shadows and mists and gleams to stage-effects, and roses and heliotrope to the mingled perfume of size and calico,' remarked Claud, looking over the flowers and shrubs to the blue horizon.

In the middle distance, seen through a vista in the park, lay the town of Aylmer. The grey church tower cutting sharply against the misty distance caught Mrs.

Aylmer's roving glance, and turned her thoughts in another direction.

'And, my dear Claud, while I am talking to you on serious subjects, perhaps you will not take it amiss if I add a few words on another matter which weighs on my mind,' began Mrs. Aylmer apologetically.

'Certainly, anything you like,' said Claud lightly, but he looked startled.

'Perhaps it may be owing to your Italian education—perhaps to the mistaken ideas of the present day, especially among gentlemen—but, my dear, I have remarked that you never go to church. Didn't Judith take you when you were little?'

'Yes, when I was little and knew nothing, Judith did take me,' said Claud, flushing hotly. 'That was just it. But when I found out the truth, I was not such a hypocrite as to continue going just for form's sake.'

‘Oh, my dear, of course if you have scruples that makes a difference,’ cried Mrs. Aylmer, startled by his vehemence. ‘I didn’t know you had scruples—I thought it was carelessness. People abroad are so careless. I wasn’t even sure if Judith had had you confirmed; and then, you know, that might have been so awkward if you wished to get married—I believe it would not be legal. I shouldn’t like to lay it down as a point of law,’ cried the soft old lady, who knew as much of law as she did of the Koran; ‘because, you know, I might be mistaken, still I believe I am correct in saying it would not be legal.’

This delicate point of law was doomed to remain unsettled, for at this moment Mrs. Brand appeared, dragging with her the rather reluctant Sally. Matters were not

going at all as the good lady wished. Sally and Jack were consulting, rehearsing, and arranging all day long, and Claud seldom went near them. Even Harry came in for many smiles of encouragement and kind words, because, if the truth must be told, he was at the present moment of great use to the young manager.

Sally was an artist, and she had her heart in her work: this was what her mother always failed to understand. She was not by any means an artist, and she had her heart very firmly fixed on the good things of this life. So her daughter's behaviour, which was for the moment utterly free from any coquetry at all, beyond what she considered necessary to keep the men about her in good humour, caused the anxious parent many misgivings and filled her with smothered rage.

‘Mr. Aylmer, they want you so terribly,’ she announced. ‘You really must assist at the rehearsal this afternoon. I looked in at the last one, and it was an exhibition—a positive exhibition. You really must give them a few hints.’

‘But I assure you I don’t feel competent to take such a responsibility on myself,’ began Claud, but Sally broke in on his excuses.

‘Don’t be so horribly idle. You can prompt, at all events—do come, Mr. Aylmer.’

Sally’s anxiety to get away from her mother, and not to lose valuable time, gave an earnestness to her manner that it certainly would not have had otherwise. Harry Johnson, coming from the barn that had been turned into his studio, noted the entreating accents of the beloved voice, and

wrinkled up his rather boyish brow into as many frowns as he could manage, while he stalked after them past the tennis-players, with dignity worthy of a tragedian or a Red Indian, to take his part in the impending rehearsal.

Mrs. Aylmer followed too, but meekly and sorrowfully.

‘Poor Claud, it is worse than I thought!’ she murmured sadly to herself. ‘Why did Judith bring him up abroad? He is evidently a Roman Catholic, or an Agnostic—perhaps both. Yes,’ sighed the little lady, as she went up the steps of the terrace, ‘I fear it is only too probable that he is both.’

CHAPTER IX.

THE REHEARSAL.

A REHEARSAL by daylight—can anything make a stronger demand on the imagination? Where everything has to be imagined—the audience, the lights, the stage, the scenery, the dresses, the makes-up, in most cases the properties—and above all, the applause! Can anything be more deadening to an ordinary intellect, or more depressing to average artistic eyes? But when to this is added the difficulty of remembering a great number of frequently rather meaningless words, including cues, exits, and entrances, and other formulæ,

it must be admitted that the general effect is apt to be dreary. Few imaginations are equal to the strain. It was here that Sally triumphed—a far more signal victory, though unknown and unrecorded, than she ever achieved on the stage. She was imaginative enough to stand this ordeal; she could imagine everything, down to the applause. She was almost afraid of the unknown force of this power. It gave her sometimes a feeling of insecurity, a difficulty in distinguishing between real and imaginary events, a dread of imagining herself into some feeling which she did not really possess.

At present, however, the quality stood her in good stead; she was where she was supposed to be, in a French salon at the beginning of this century. The gentlemen, on the contrary, were in a decidedly British

room at the end of it. Jack, in his Norfolk jacket and knickerbockers, was—and felt himself—singularly unlike a Revolutionist; while Harry, who was in his tennis flannels, was scarcely more like a concealed Royalist in the garb of a pedlar. The play they were rehearsing was the well-known comedy, ‘Delicate Ground;’ and the three persons selected to represent the characters looked their parts sufficiently well, and their several dispositions were akin to those they were called on to personify—but therein lay the difficulty. They felt bound to act somehow or something; to be themselves would be insipid. Sally, of course, was the exception; she could represent herself or anybody else with equal facility. She simply was the flighty little aristocrat, scorning her citizen husband, kissing with unreal effusion the letter from her dead

lover, and waxing unfeignedly angry at the citizen's coolness over the discovery, and still more so at his barbarity in stating that the precious document had been written, not in the blood of Alphonse, but in red ink.

But even Sally was heavily handicapped on the present occasion. Her stern and undeviating rule as manager was invariably to admit no lookers-on during rehearsals ; but this rule was ignored by her mother without any possibility of enforcing it on the part of Sally.

Mrs. Brand curtly stated her intention of stopping to hear the whole play, and of so doing in order to satisfy her maternal mind that all was as it should be. In vain her daughter suggested that she should take a copy of the play, and study it at her leisure. Mrs. Brand was inexorable.

‘ The book is all very well, my dear,’

she said to her daughter, with withering scorn. 'It isn't so much what you *say* that I mind.'

'Then what on earth is it that you do mind?' was Sally's not very respectful response.

'I want to see the whole affair, and judge for myself,' replied Mrs. Brand diplomatically.

But though she had avowed a reason, it was not by any means the reason of her taking up her position in the uninviting precincts of an embryo stage. Her feelings were tolerably tough, and she could have endured witnessing even a stage embrace, provided her daughter bestowed that mark of affection on the right individual. She considered Major Aylmer to be very decidedly the wrong individual, and Harry Johnson hardly less so; and she attended

this rehearsal with the amiable intention of making herself disagreeable to at least one of them, ousting him from his post, and inducing Claud to accept the vacant *rôle*. For this purpose she had secured Claud's attendance as prompter. An unpleasant old lady, truly, and so utterly given to scheming withal, that, as Jack had once remarked, it was a wonder she ever went to sleep without scheming as to what she should dream about. What are the dreams of these women? one wonders sometimes. What are their waking thoughts as on their ears fall solemn exhortations, pious warnings against 'the world, the flesh, and the devil,' from the living lips of priest or preacher, and from the more powerful words of dead prophet and psalmist? Does it ever occur to them that they are wrapped up in the pride of life; that they are dead to the

quiet influences of nature ; that the innocent prattle of young children, the sweetness of spring flowers, the soft fluffiness of baby creatures fail to touch their hearts, and that heaven itself could have little to offer them that they would care for ?

At all events, here Mrs. Brand was, and here she intended to remain till the end of the performance. She planted herself firmly in the most comfortable chair she could find, and she took up a strong position right in face of the enemy. Even Sally was conscious of her presence, and could not forget herself in her part ; while Jack relieved his feelings in a confidential aside to his cousin, ‘ Who the—something could act, with that old lynx glaring at him all the while ? ’

Harry Johnson, though by no means the best actor, was the least disconcerted

of the three ; he was so full of his own wrongs that he hardly noticed Mrs. Brand at all, and was quite unaffected by her malign influence. He played the part in a very different spirit to that contemplated by the author. His jealousy of Jack raged hot and furious, and he threw into the part of Alphonse all that he knew of tragic intensity—by so doing completely altering the character of the play, wherein the fugitive Royalist is so very flighty as to be unobjectionable, and thereby making the plot trench rather too closely on ‘delicate ground.’ His sense of humour was for the moment completely in abeyance, and his entreaties to Pauline to leave her citizen-husband were more energetic and passionate than the occasion warranted.

Sally was in despair. She had often had to manage conflicting admirers—in fact, she

was well accustomed to have what she playfully called 'four-in-hand;' but to soothe down an exasperated youth in the midst of a scene, and with her parent looking on, was a feat to which she was not used, and it tried her nerve.

'Fly!—and without you, Pauline! Never!' cried Harry, as Alphonse—and even more as himself. 'I will not, I swear it! We fly and live, or stay and die—together!'

'Not so tragic, *please*,' whispered Sally; 'and, oh Harry, you hurt my hands!'

But at this point Mrs. Brand rose to order.

'I cannot say that I approve of this play that you have selected,' she said magisterially. 'I cannot think it nice to choose a plot in which a wife runs away from her husband.'

‘Oh, but she doesn’t ; wait half a minute, and you’ll see ; on the contrary, she runs up against him,’ interposed Sally.

‘I think a few more sentences will put it all right, Mrs. Brand,’ said Claud, coming to the rescue.

‘Oh, if you say so, Mr. Aylmer—I’ve every confidence in your judgment ; but I can’t say I like it, as far as it has got, at all. Your prompter’s place is no sinecure. When I asked you to help, I didn’t know what a task you would be given’ (here she glared at Sally). ‘The prompter’s voice is the one I have chiefly heard ; and Major Aylmer’s idea of by-play, or business, or whatever you call it, seems to consist in looking surreptitiously at his play-book.’

‘Why, hang it all !’ said Jack, losing his

temper at this uncalled-for attack—‘when a fellow doesn’t half know his words—the fact is, the rule ought to be enforced, and no lookers-on admitted till the words are perfect, at all events.’

‘Thanks, Major Aylmer. You wish to turn me out of the room,’ rejoined Mrs. Brand, in her most aggravating manner.

Claud was sitting in an imaginary prompter’s box at a little distance from the belligerents. Sally ran across the room to him with entreaty in every line of her small face, and supplication in her pretty eyes.

‘Mr. Aylmer, do come to the rescue—separate them before there is a row ! It is your house, and you are the person to do it.’

But the work was already half done. Mrs. Brand was so charmed at the sight of her daughter appealing to Claud for assist-

ance, that she almost forgot her anger, and turned graciously to the young master of the house as he came forward.

‘I think it is premature to judge of the play as yet, Mrs. Brand. If you will wait till they know their parts we will have a dress rehearsal, at which I hope you will be present. In the meantime I assure you, on my word, that there is nothing in the play that anyone could object to.’

‘I am perfectly satisfied with your assurance, Mr. Aylmer ; I have every confidence in you,’ she said, while Claud bowed and tried to look pleased. ‘Only I should be glad to know that you would always be present at the rehearsals yourself. I do not say in the capacity of prompter ; I would not tax your good-nature so far.’ She bestowed a very acid look on Jack as she concluded. Claud bowed again, but his

face fell ; he certainly had not bargained for this.

Mrs. Brand rose from her chair and prepared to depart, but could not resist delivering a parting shot at the enemy. The language of rows came to her lips with fatal facility.

‘Now that this most unpleasant affair is arranged—through your kind intervention, Mr. Aylmer—I will leave the performers to finish their rehearsal, much as I disapprove of the manner in which it has hitherto been conducted. You must pardon my anxiety ; an only daughter, you know, is such a treasure—my one lamb !’

With this she vanished through the door, and Sally, in the exuberance of her joy at the deliverance, executed a little bound in the air, and murmured ‘Baa,’ having due regard that the monosyllable should not

reach her parent's retreating ears. Then she proceeded to set things straight. To smooth down Jack's ruffled plumage was an easy affair ; and Citizen Sang-froid went through the remainder of his *rôle* in a manner that would have astonished anyone who had seen the halting and yet flurried way in which he had rendered the first half of the drama, when he certainly had not conveyed the impression of '*sang froid*' into his conception of the part. But now that the old dragon's eyes were off him—we are using his phraseology—he felt himself a different creature, and was determined to show Sally he could be something else than a gesticulating stick. Claud kindly supplied words when they failed him ; and, with that half-tender, half-provoked face of Pauline beside him, with eyes that, as belonging to a manager,

applauded him, and again, as being wifely orbs, gazed at him with wistful pleading in them, Jack found it not difficult to play his part with effect. The tender passages towards the end of the little comedy were really good. Pauline tries to find out what makes her husband so very willing to get rid of her, and this half-pathetic half-defiant scene suited Sally's style of acting and face excellently well. She had just given with great force the passage, 'Love feels a passion which he cannot feign, and goes direct to his object without stopping to reason at all,' when she was startled by one of the windows being flung up violently, the noise of it partly concealing a sound that was curiously like a groan.

'I beg your pardon, I didn't mean to interrupt,' said Harry, with a set voice and a white face; 'but the heat is really in-

tolerable ; it is impossible to breathe on a day like this.'

'How tiresome !' thought Sally ; 'now he'll make a fuss.'

Sally was never more thoroughly in earnest than when she was acting, and for the time all other interests gave way to this—the desire of bringing what she had undertaken to do to a successful ending. Nothing short of an earthquake would turn her from her point—certainly a lover's imbecilities would not do so. A proposal from a millionaire would have had to stand over till the tag had been said and the curtain had fallen.

'What a nuisance he is !' thought Sally, eyeing him askance. 'I must be nice to him in the green-cheese part, and tide it over.'

But the green-cheese part did not respond

to the claim made on it. The episode occurs at the end of the play, where Alphonse, believing in the extreme flightiness of his beloved, offers to go to the moon in search of a pound of green cheese for her. As the lady knows nothing of the highly-coloured description of her character supplied by her husband to Alphonse, she naturally concludes that the latter has gone out of his mind, and is extremely frightened, and not at all touched by his generous offer. The situation did not offer much scope for peace-making, and the only conciliatory measures Sally could take at this unpropitious moment were comprised in a beseeching glance, and a smile quite uncalled for by any words of Pauline's, who, in fact, at this juncture rids herself of her flighty adorer in a very unceremonious manner. Harry was not mollified by the glance, and the smile failed

to drive away his frown ; but the climax of his suppressed fury was reached during the reconciliation scene which ends the play. Husband and wife, united and happy, jeer the frivolous cause of their dispute, who, extremely relieved at the turn events have taken, bears it with great composure. Harry, however, was not so philosophical, and his tone, which should have been light and airy, was unmistakably bitter.

‘ Bravo ! ’ said Claud, as he let down an imaginary curtain, while the performers bowed to an imaginary audience, with the exception of Alphonse, who had stalked off into the background. ‘ So that has come to an end.’

‘ Yes, thank goodness ! ’ said Harry Johnson viciously. ‘ I’ve had enough of it for one ; ’ and the young artist departed out of the room with a good deal of vehemence.

‘What does he mean by that? what on earth is the matter now?’ asked Jack.

He had been smiling down at the top of Pauline’s head, partly because his *rôle* demanded it of him, chiefly because he felt immensely relieved that he had got safely to the end of his words; and he had paid very little attention to his imaginary rival’s looks or words beyond thinking that the fellow was inclined to over-act his part. Pauline, too, had been smiling and blissful; for the life of her, though she knew the danger of it, she had not been able to keep the happy shining out of her eyes, the rosy colour out of her face. But these signs of emotion were purely vicarious; they were given to Pauline’s happiness, and had nothing to do with Sarah Brand, a fact that Harry and many wiser persons failed to understand. Sarah Brand, however, was

recalled to herself completely by this very pronounced outburst. The pretty rosy glow deepened to an uncomfortable scarlet, caused more by anger than confusion; to make a scene, all about nothing, just when they were really getting on with the play, it was too bad! For the moment she was so vexed that she could not speak, while Jack gazed at her in deepening amazement. Claud's quick tact took in the situation, while his kindness prompted him to invent a little fiction for Sally's benefit.

'I am afraid Mrs. Brand's unfortunate remarks may have had something to do with it. Actors are always touchy, you know.'

'But, my dear fellow, it was I who came in for most of her uncomplimentary remarks; and I've survived it, you see,' cried Jack, blundering as usual. 'She sat upon me

much more than upon Harry ; what's he to go resenting it for in that absurd way ?'

'My dear Jack, you were not in it at all when the play was stopped,' remarked Claud decisively. 'The scene was one between Alphonse and Pauline, and Alphonse seems to have been brooding over it. He'll come to his senses by-and-by, no doubt. Miss Brand, we ought all to apologize to you for the trouble we all give you. I wonder you haven't given up the affair in disgust long ago.'

'Never !' cried Sally, smiling once more. 'We will carry it through to a triumphant end yet. You shall see !'

CHAPTER X.

THE STUDIO.

THOUGH Sally had spoken so confidently to her coadjutors, inwardly she was not free from a quaking sensation of anxiety. She thought of the affair not at all from a personal point of view, but solely as to how it might affect her theatrical prospects. She was on these occasions lifted above all selfish considerations in a manner that if it had been continued might have made her a very transcendental character. Unfortunately, when the affair was over, she dropped back into everyday life, with its hopes and fears, quarrels and flirtations, with amazing

rapidity. On the present occasion she was exceedingly angry with Harry, and she certainly had cause for being so ; nevertheless, she determined to suppress her righteous rage, and endeavour to coax her inconveniently jealous adorer back into good humour again. It would be so very awkward to have to make a change—now at the eleventh hour ; and then she did not know where to turn for another Alphonse de Grandier. Most of the young men staying in the house had been drafted into the waxworks, owing to their confessed or quickly-found-out inability to represent anything else. Altogether it would be a much simpler course to prevail upon Harry to continue his part. She felt tolerably confident of success ; she had always made him do whatever she liked hitherto. At the present moment that æsthetic youth

was covering yards of canvas with most Philistine colouring, on purpose to please her. This reflection softened the rancour of her ire, and made it more easy for her to bend her pride and go in search of the artist. He had probably gone back to his barn (turned into a temporary studio), and she had meant all day to look in and see how he was getting on; she would do so now, just as if he had never made that rude remark, and she hoped that if she ignored it, he would have the good taste to follow her example. She would not go too soon; she deliberately took her afternoon tea first, and then played a game or two of tennis to strengthen her nerves. Then, as Harry did not make his appearance, she determined to seek the lion in his den.

With a good deal of trepidation, she popped her head through the open upper-

half of the barn-door, and took a quiet survey before declaring herself. The wall on which the canvas was fixed was at right angles to the door over which Sally leaned ; how well she remembered the learned discussion about side-lights which had led to the selection of it but a few brief days ago ! How nice and sensible Harry had been then, eager even about nailing up the canvas, willing and ready to stir up potfuls of evil odours boiled down, obliging enough to cover himself with whiting during necessary but basely mechanical processes much beneath his artistic soul at its ordinary level—and all this ardour was apparently caused by pure zeal for the success of the theatricals. Sally's heart misgave her now as to the unmixed purity of his motives, but she still hoped for the best. It must not be imagined that Sally was insensible

to the charms of conquest, or that she was at all above enjoying a flirtation ; but there were times when she put these things aside, as inconvenient and out of place, and this was one of those times.

Harry's back was turned towards her at the present moment, and she could only judge of his feelings by the vehemence of his actions. He was at work on the drop-scene, a Venetian subject selected by Sally comprising the usual blue-green water, gondolas, palace steps, statues, and signori in costumes, the brilliant tones of which gave a mental toothache to the lover of sad tertiaries. However, he had worked at it bravely, for Sally's sake. He was now working at it viciously, for the same reason. He dashed on the blues and the lakes with a violence which damaged his brushes ; he imparted a sardonic grin to the smirking

cavaliers, while he made the inane ladies more utterly silly than they had previously been. And yet, though in some things his conduct was childish, he was on the whole more sensible than many lovers; he had not sat down to mope and brood, neither had he flown at the object of his jealous adoration; but he had set himself to get rid of his superfluous emotions by work—the work that lay nearest to his hand. Sally had hopes of him.

‘If he takes it like that, the drop-scene will soon be finished, at all events,’ was her highly practical thought. ‘If he would only be equally sensible about the play! Well done, Harry!’ she went on aloud. ‘You are by far the most persevering and industrious of us all.’

Harry turned round with a really tragic start; unfortunately his costume was not in

keeping with his face and manner ; he had slipped an artist's blouse over his white flannels, and this, as well as his face and hair, was plentifully decorated by blobs and smears of various-coloured distemper. The combined effect was rather trying to Sally's gravity ; but she knew that to laugh would be fatal, so she resisted the impulse and looked straight at her parti-hued lover with serious eyes.

‘ You here ! you are the last person I expected to see here,’ he remarked moodily.

‘ Well, considering that I come every day to see how you are getting on, I call it highly ungrateful of you to say that,’ responded Sally. ‘ But never mind, I forgive you in consideration of the very excellent way in which you *are* getting on.’

‘ I thought you would be far more

pleasantly occupied,' he continued, harping on the same string.

'Having tea?' suggested Sally. 'I've had it, thank you. By-the-way, I might as well have brought you some. I'll go and get it, or send somebody with it.'

'No, don't go; I want to speak to you,' said Harry quickly. 'Come in, Sally, and sit down for five minutes.'

'You haven't got a chair fit to be sat in,' objected the girl, who was attired in a pretty white frock, and had the fear of Mrs. Brand before her eyes; then seeing the despair with which this announcement was received, she added: 'But I'll come in and criticize the scene if you'll promise to go on painting—I won't stay unless you promise.'

'Very well,' said Harry, seizing a brush full of colour and applying it haphazard,

greatly to the detriment of what he had considered the prettiest bit of his scene.

Surely none of the capricious ladies of romance ever laid so difficult a rule on an obedient gallant!

Sally walked up and down in front of the painting, approving here, suggesting an alteration there, and receiving no answer whatever from the author of it, who, in fact, had not heard a single word of her discourse, but continued blindly to plaster on great daubs of distemper. Sally, of course, perceived his want of attention, and seeing that the case was more serious than she had expected, and might be made worse by speaking of it, she was preparing to withdraw quietly, as our stately ancestors phrased it—to slope, in the short parlance of the day, when she was once more stopped by Harry.

‘Don’t go, Sally; I want to speak to you.’

‘Then why on earth don’t you speak?’ asked Sally, thinking a little prose might be good for him. ‘You made the same remark five minutes ago—and then said nothing.’

‘Because you bewilder a fellow,’ said poor Harry incoherently, putting up his hand, with the brush still in it, to push back one of his long æsthetic locks, and thereby adding a streak of bright yellow to the previous adornments of his visage. ‘You turn one round somehow. I was very angry with you before you came in, kind and smiling; then you made me forget it. But, Sally, I have been wretched ever since we began that hateful play, and what I want to say is, I cannot go on with it.’

‘Have you anything else you’d like to

say ?' said Sally, sitting down with the calmness of despair in the hitherto despised chair, which certainly left much to be desired in point of cleanliness. This was precisely the declaration which she had most dreaded. 'Don't mind me—but it is quite unnecessary to say that.'

'I do mind you,' murmured Harry feebly ; 'but——'

'If you minded me you'd do what I tell you,' interrupted Sally, getting better of the collapse. 'How am I to play Pauline without an Alphonse ?'

'But, Sally, I can't do it—I can't stand it. I don't want to be disobliging, but I *can't*,' said the poor youth, much disconcerted by the maiden's business-like view of the matter. 'You don't know what it is to be jealous.'

'No, thank goodness, I don't!' Sally

had regained her vivacity by this time, had pulled herself together, and was determined not to let him go without a struggle. 'Of all the selfish, inconvenient, thoroughly tiresome amusements anyone can take up I consider jealousy to be the selfishest, the inconvenientest, the most utterly provoking.'

'Perhaps you've never had occasion to be jealous of anyone,' remonstrated Harry. 'I have. Put yourself in my place, you know. If you were very fond of a fellow, so fond that you cared for the very ground he trod on——'

'That's so likely— isn't it?' in a scornful aside.

'And then if you saw him wholly taken up with someone else, talking and laughing—their heads always together.'

Sally jumped up out of her uninviting

chair, absolutely speechless from wrath.

Harry added quickly :

‘Oh, I mean over arrangements and things ; but still—how would you like that ?’

Sally drew herself to her full height, which was about five feet two inches, and delivered her verdict with much solemnity, and also with absolute truth.

‘If they were arranging how to make things go off in the best manner possible, and settling how to avoid any chance of a *fiasco*, I should like it amazingly. You may try, if you like,’ she added, after a moment’s pause, and with an air of impartiality blended with conviction. ‘Arrange backgrounds with one of the Miss Bartons, for instance.’

‘Ah, but then I am not the fellow whose footprints you adore,’ objected Harry with

reason. 'I'm quite aware that you would not mind how much I flirted with one of the Miss Bartons—or all three of them.'

'It isn't flirting, and I think you are abominably rude,' said Sally warmly.

'Well, it looked like flirting, at all events; and that play was the climax.'

'If your intellect fails to perceive any distinction between Citizen Sangfroid and John Aylmer, and Pauline and Sarah Brand, I'm sorry for you.'

'Of course, I know acting isn't reality,' said Harry, colouring under this scornful speech, and viciously digging his yellow-laden brush into a pot of blue distemper, thereby spoiling both. 'Any fool knows that. But your acting is so confoundedly like reality, Sally. For instance, need you have looked so absurdly happy at all his spoony speeches?—need he have put his

arm round your waist?—need he have kissed your hand when you gave it him?

‘He didn’t!’ ejaculated Sally; ‘he kissed his own hand. You are horrid, Harry! and I’m very glad you are going away, and I—I hope I shall never see you again!’ and Sally gave a little sob, which was not acting, though probably an ill-natured person might have thought it was, but which had the most surprising effect on her lover. It brought him, metaphorically and actually, down on his knees. Regardless of his injured feelings, regardless of his white flannels and the more than doubtful nature of the floor, he knelt beside the chair into which she had thrown herself, and begged for forgiveness.

‘I’m a brute, Sally! Don’t cry, for Heaven’s sake don’t cry! I didn’t mean half of it; only I was so miserable, I didn’t

know what I was saying. If you will only tell me you don't care for that fellow——'

'Will you promise to go on with the play?' asked Sally, quickly taking down her hands from her face. Satisfied with what she saw, she added: 'Well, then, I don't care for him—except as a friend always obliging and never inconvenient,' with a reproachful glance at Harry. 'And, what is more to the point, he doesn't care for me—not an atom—not a grain; and that melancholy fact must be perfectly apparent to everybody who isn't wilfully blind;' and Sally laughed, with perhaps just the slightest tinge of bitterness hidden in the mirth.

'My dear, you have made me more happy than I have ever been in my life,' murmured the young artist, possessing himself of one of his lady's little hands.

‘But you do not know how much I love you, and when I see other fellows——’

‘Sara!’ a portentous voice struck on their ears, and brought consternation to their hearts. The frowning and awe-inspiring visage of Mrs. Brand appeared above the half-door, where a short time before Sally’s smiling face had brought sunshine and glory, and had transformed the barn into an exquisite dreamland to her lover, despite of anger and jealousy. Mrs. Brand’s unexpected appearance produced a very different result.

‘Get up, Harry!’ said Sarah hurriedly, trying to keep utter consternation out of her face and voice. ‘You’ll do it all right when the day comes.’

‘No, Sara, that won’t do.’ Mrs. Brand entered the room in a majestic manner, sweeping over one or two pipkins of dis-

temper, and seating herself in the awe-inspiring attitude of an Indian idol, in the chair just vacated by Sarah. 'That will not do. Henry was not rehearsing his scene ; no one could make a mistake between his acting and reality. It is useless also for you to say that he was looking for that dirty brush on which he was kneeling, or, in fact, to invent any other solution for this extraordinary scene.'

Poor Sarah stood abashed and silent before her parent, who had not scrupled to point out with unflinching severity the weak point of her daughter's character. Timidity, joined to a ready invention, is a snare ; and Sarah had occasionally been caught in it. But while she stood confounded by this unkind accusation, Harry Johnson had risen to his feet and recovered his self-possession, and he spoke with an

accent of reproof to which Mrs. Brand was little accustomed.

‘Do not blame your daughter for what was entirely dictated by her kindness of heart. She wished to screen, not herself, but me. I am not at all ashamed of anything that I have said, Mrs. Brand, and I am glad to have an opportunity of repeating it in your presence.’

‘Upon my word!’ Then, like all bullies, she turned to attack the weaker party who feared her, instead of returning the fire of the stronger one who assailed her. ‘Sara! Go to your room. I will come and speak to you presently. You must have given Henry the most strong encouragement, or he would not have presumed to speak in this confident manner.’

‘You are quite wrong, Mrs. Brand,’ eagerly interposed the young man. ‘I

only wish you were right. Everyone who knows your daughter must love her. I do, certainly ; but she has never given me the slightest reason to suppose that she returns the feeling.'

'Is this true?' Mrs. Brand's pleasant and ladylike inquiry was made in a doubtful tone.

'It is certainly true. I have never yet dared to hazard the question.'

'Then you had better do so now and receive Sara's answer in my presence, and so make an end of this folly,' was the pleasing proposal of Sarah's mamma.

'No ; please don't!' The urgency of the occasion had given the girl courage to speak at last. 'Oh, mamma, please don't make him speak. Do wait till after the theatricals.'

'Sara, you speak like a child! Can you

think it right,' turning to the young man—
'can you think it justifiable to take advantage of the babyish ignorance of the ways of the world shown by such a foolish child?'

'I fail to catch your meaning, Mrs. Brand.' Harry was resolved that he would not be provoked into an angry outburst, and he kept his temper in a way that made Mrs. Brand hate him heartily. 'Sally knows that I love her; but I am quite content to wait her pleasure and convenience before asking for any answer on her part.'

'I never heard of anything so preposterous in my life,' replied his antagonist. 'I, for one, will never consent to such an extraordinary arrangement. You must be utterly unacquainted with the usages of society to propose such a thing. I permit

you to address my daughter. She is of age, and decides for herself; but you must abide by her decision. If she accepts you, well and good; I have nothing to say'—here the lady looked a good deal. 'If she rejects you, you will, I hope, have enough gentlemanly feeling to leave the house. You can easily find some excuse.'

Probably the good lady's love of truth, which was chiefly vicarious, would not have interfered with her inventing some plausible reason for the young man's sudden flight. She had been determined to get rid of either Jack or Harry, to make room in the play for Claud, being strongly possessed by the elementary idea that people who enact tender scenes together usually fall in love with each other. She would have greatly preferred getting rid of Jack, as being much the more dangerous and less eligible

of the two *dramatis personæ* ; but she felt it might be beyond her power to oust Jack from his position, whereas fate had thrown Harry into her hands. Seeing that the young man still looked irresolutely at her daughter, she added : ‘ I shall otherwise be compelled to leave Aylmer’s Court myself—with Sara.’

The addenda to this threat decided Harry. He went up to Sally and took one of her little, cold hands into his. In spite of the smears across his face, in spite of his costume and the very visible marks of the paint-brush on which he had knelt, there was a dignity in the young man’s bearing which the girl had never noticed before, and she looked up at him with a respect which she had certainly never before felt for him. It was one of the supreme moments of his life, poor boy,

though it might be of but slight interest to the others. He was so utterly and thoroughly in earnest that no extraneous ideas came in to mar the oneness of his thought.

‘Dear Sally, for your sake I would have been silent until it pleased you that I should speak.’ He began in so low a tone that Mrs. Brand could scarcely hear him, though she was not at all above listening. ‘You know I would do anything to please you; I would have waited willingly till all this was over, for my answer. But you see it can’t be. Your mother is determined to separate us, unless you decide that we need never be separated any more. Our fate is in your hands, dear. You know that I love you; there is no need for me to say that over and over again as if it were something surprising. Everyone loves you;

but perhaps not quite so well as I do. Will you trust yourself to me? Will you be my wife?’

Sally looked around her with appealing eyes. This was the avowal she had been dreading, and that she had intended to stave off till a convenient season; and no doubt she would have succeeded in her intentions but for her mother’s interference. A wild idea flitted through her mind—could she accept him till after the theatricals, and then trust to his generosity to let her off? A glance into his earnest face made her abandon the idea. It may be held that Sally was utterly heartless in giving a thought at such a moment to so frivolous a subject; but it must be remembered that she had one attribute of genius, the power of concentration. When she fixed her mind on anything, she fixed the whole of her

mind on it. It must also be remembered that she had hitherto regarded Harry as a rather foolish boy, and that she had been more inclined to admire Jack's freedom from sentiment and the strongly accentuated prose of his character. Still, as she looked into Harry's face, a still wilder idea than the first came into her head. He *did* love her; she would never be afraid of him—never be afraid to speak the truth. Why shouldn't she say 'yes,' and mean it now and always? *Why* was not far off: her eyes wandered to her mother's face, and she knew at once that she dare not do it. She snatched away her hand, and employed it and its fellow to cover her bewildered, frightened eyes.

'Come here, my child,' said Mrs. Brand, rising from her magisterial chair, and going to the support of her daughter. 'You see

how you distress her. I hope you will have the good taste, Henry, to accept your answer.'

'I have had no answer,' said the young fellow, growing white and miserable. 'Speak, my darling! say only one word, and I will trouble you no more.'

'Tell him to go,' commanded Mrs. Brand, in a stage-whisper, clutching her child's shoulder with a tightening grasp.

'Go!' murmured Sally, scarcely audibly.

The glance of triumph in Mrs. Brand's eyes gave force to the monosyllable. But Harry had heard it, and required no second bidding. He bowed his head silently, gave one rather wild glance round him, noted, strange to say, the havoc he had wrought during the last hour with his scene, kissed Sally's hand as he passed her, regardless of the furious look bestowed on

him by her supporter, and hastened out into the sunshine and into the midst of a flock of indignant geese, without seeing or hearing anything.

‘Thank goodness, that’s satisfactorily settled!’ said Mrs. Brand.

But Sally sat down in the celebrated chair, and indulged in a hearty fit of crying.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BOND OF FRIENDSHIP.

‘I WOULD do anything I could to be of service to you, Miss Brand, but this I cannot do.’

‘That reply really ought to be stereotyped ; everyone uses it,’ answered Sally, pouting. ‘It is astonishing that everybody will do everything for one—except just the one thing one wants.’

‘I know that I cannot claim any originality either for it or for the remark that I would rather disoblige anyone else except yourself ; you are always so good-natured that it is a shame not to help you. I will

follow Harry Johnson to the uttermost ends of England and bring him back, if you wish it.'

A rosy flush mounted into Sally's fair little face, and she interposed hastily :

' Oh no, Mr. Aylmer ; please don't !'

' I don't think he has behaved well about the affair. He should have given us a hint that he might be called off by important business,' said Claud, with the severity of the young.

' Mr. Aylmer, please don't think that it was his fault—I assure you it was not. He would have stayed willingly, gladly—it was all mamma's——'

Sally stopped suddenly, covered with confusion.

Claud looked at her earnestly, with admiration and something of envy in his eyes.

' You are an honest soul,' he said

dreamily. 'Everyone seems able to be honest—except me.'

Sally gazed at Claud with open eyes. His remark had brought back her thoughts quickly from following her absent lover's flight, to her present companion and his surroundings. They were perched upon a very insecure ledge on the top of the ruined Castle at Aylmer ; the rest of the party were rambling or scrambling over other parts of the tottering edifice, with the exception of Mrs. Brand, who remained in the grassy courtyard, keeping an eye alternately on the servants—who were unpacking hampers and setting out lunch—and on her daughter, with whom, for once in her life, she was satisfied. If she could only have taken in the motives of Sarah's unusual civility to Claud, she would have been provoked. Nothing but her exceeding

need of an Alphonse, and the knowledge that he looked the part and could probably play it creditably, would have induced her to apply to him for help. She saw through her mother's efforts on her behalf, and being thoroughly sick, poor child, of being flung at the head of eligibles, she had always treated Claud with the distant respect of acquaintanceship—a position, indeed, which Claud held towards all his guests without exception. Sally, so sympathetic to most people, had not understood, or cared to understand, this strange youth. She had described him once to a young friend as 'a mixture of Bayard and Sir Charles Grandison, with a good many of the sorrows of Werther thrown in ;' an attempt at character-painting which had drawn down upon her a severe rebuke from Mrs. Brand, who happened to be within ear-shot.

But, for the first time, it occurred to Sally that Claud was unhappy—really unhappy. No imaginary Werther-like sentiment ever made anyone look as he was looking now. The girl's kind heart was instantly touched ; he was desperately unhappy—she did not, just at present, feel too happy herself, perhaps they might help each other. Sarah felt in herself the capacity of being a good friend. There was something about Claud, in spite of his self-accusation, which promised the same quality in him,—and gave security that the bond once entered into would be binding always. Sarah was in some respects rather a lonely little maid ; she had neither brother nor sister, no father, and no very intimate friend among the girls of the neighbourhood, most of whom were jealous of her. She said nothing about friendship ;

she never talked about feelings—she felt them instead, and the result in this case might have been known by the very first word she said. Without permission asked or given, she called him by his name ; and he, understanding her thoroughly, accepted the proffered bond.

‘Claud, I do not wish to pry into your secrets, but I know that you are miserable. If I can help you, you may rely on me always.’

‘You can help me, Sally, simply by letting me tell you that I *am* miserable—and by asking for no explanation. Have you ever been very unhappy yourself?’

‘Not *very* unhappy, only a little,’ owned Sally, quite vexed that Fate had not dealt her harder blows. ‘But I can imagine it.’

‘If you had, you would know that the very greatest relief possible is just that—to

be able to speak of it, to be able to say "I am miserable," without any fear of consequences, fatal to others besides yourself. But you have led too safe and happy a life by your mother's side to be able to understand this.'

Sarah had not been in the habit of applying these adjectives to the position indicated, so she replied vaguely, 'Have I?'

'And you are so young,' continued Claud dreamily.

Sally felt herself on safer ground here. 'Do you know that I am older than you are, Claud? I am nearly twenty-two, while you are not yet twenty-one.'

'Not twenty-one till next week; I shall come of age on Friday, the eighteenth of July, the day of my poor young mother's death. A miserable day then, a more miserable day now. The last ten years

of my life have been a slow preparation for this day ; they have been years of pain, of blind striving against a cruel wrong, of bitter, unavailing shame. No wonder I feel old at one-and-twenty.'

'Claud, whatever you feel called on to do will be right and just,' said Sally, with a sort of inspiration in her soft voice.

'Tell me, Sally, in your own case, would you put truth above the world ? Would you give up friends, home, and country, blast your own life and that of another—all for the sake of truth ?'

Sally did not answer for a moment; then she rose up in her excitement, and stood on the treacherous ledge so near the top of the Castle wall that her slight little figure showed dark against the bright sky.

'As you have asked me, Claud,' she said, looking down at him with her hands

clasped, 'I will try, I will do my utmost to answer you truthfully. I do not believe I could do it. I hate falseness, but yet in many cases I know I should be afraid to tell the truth. If it entailed an uproar and exposure and any unpleasantness, I know I could not do it. Perhaps I would not tell a lie, but I should be silent.' Oh, Claud, what made you ask me—of all people—such a question? for I can say nothing to strengthen you.'

'Yes you can, and you have, by the very honesty of your answer,' began Claud; but as he spoke Judith's voice was heard calling to them to come down. Sally's little form against the sky had attracted Mrs. Crosby's attention, and then something in the two faces had roused her suspicion; so feigning alarm for their safety, she determined to put an end to the interview.

‘How could you be so rash, dear Claud,’ she gently made remonstrance, ‘as to take Miss Brand into such a dangerous place! Don’t you know that the whole of the stone-work up there is most unsafe, and may slip down at any moment? Miss Brand is not very heavy, certainly; but still, disastrous results sometimes spring from slight causes.’

‘Miss Brand is a very slight cause, at all events,’ remarked Jack, thinking it necessary to try to make jokes at a picnic.

‘It would have been a very disastrous result if I had come down in the middle of the lunch,’ laughed Sally, as they placed themselves round the cloth—we cannot say round the table when there was not a vestige of one, or even of a festal board. Mrs. Brand looked round her in dismay; she had for many years abstained from

sitting on the grass. She detested picnics, and nothing but the necessity of looking after her daughter would have brought her to this one, from which all the other elderly ladies had stayed away. The servants had placed the lunch just where there were no bits of old wall on which one might sit with at least dignity, even if comfort had to be sacrificed. Jack observed her wandering eyes, and, gloating over her discomfiture, perfidiously feigned to come to her assistance.

‘If you don’t mind temporary exile, Mrs. Brand, there is a very comfortable bit of wall on the other side of the yard.’

‘Thanks for the suggestion, but this is not a rehearsal. I am not going to be turned out here, at all events,’ replied Mrs. Brand, with a glance of hatred at her enemy.

The Baron, with a cosmopolitan love of peace, as ensuring also plenty and comfort, hastened to interpose between the skirmishers. He produced an empty hamper from the background.

‘Sit zere-on, Mrs. Brant,’ he remarked amiably; then seeing her hesitation, he added: ‘Do not fear him; he will not yield. I have myself sat zere-on.’

The Baron had studied English chiefly from the Old Testament writers, which imparted a peculiar style to his manner of expressing himself. As he continued to devote himself to Mrs. Brand, with the philosophic idea of making the best of everybody and of every place and of every circumstance, which was part of his character, Jack observed in a low tone to his cousin:

‘What a blessing it would be if the

Baron would marry Mrs. Brand and take her to Germany! No fellow could fall in love with that nice little girl as long as that mother-in-law was standing near.'

'Couldn't he?' asked Claud, smiling. 'I think some fellows have managed to do it, nevertheless.'

Claud knew intuitively — knew almost as well as if he had been present at the interview — all that had passed between Harry and the fair lady of his love, while Jack still blundered on with his original idea that Harry had gone off in a huff because he had been found fault with by Mrs. Brand.

'These creatures of culture never have any sense,' he remarked, and added several more expressions of opinion as to Harry's conduct, which made Sally half grateful to him for helping to preserve her secret—

half furious with him for his contemptuous remarks about her absent lover.

It may be said that no one in the house, except Mrs. Aylmer, accepted Harry's plea of sudden business. Mrs. Aylmer believed in everybody and everything.

The picnic was about as lively as picnics usually are. Sally was troubled about several things, and was subdued and quiet. Harry's sister treated her with marked coldness, and evidently considered her an incorrigible flirt who had made a fool of the lad for her own amusement. This was hard on Sally, who had not flirted with Harry—or at least only a little, not more than she could avoid. Miss Johnson, therefore, was more stiff than sociable. The three pretty Miss Bartons, dressed alike from their hats to their shoes, were pretty as usual, but not convivial. The Baron

von Lehrensborg so distinguished himself by his efforts to promote the hilarity of the company that a brilliant idea occurred to Claud.

‘I have found an Alphonse!’ he announced to Sally, as they were starting on their homeward way. ‘The Baron von Lehrensborg!’

‘But—but isn’t he rather old,’ objected Sally—‘and fat?’

‘Age can be painted out, and fat arranged,’ laughed Claud. ‘And your mother will not find fault with the running-away scene now.’

Sally laughed and blushed, and then accepted the inevitable, which meant, in this case, the Baron in the part of Alphonse.

‘Claud, there is just one word I want to say to you,’ she whispered hurriedly. ‘I’m

afraid that after what I said on the wall, you will be sorry that you trusted me. You may trust me,' she added, interrupting Claud's disclaimer. 'I would rather invent a dozen falsehoods than betray you in the slightest degree.'

CHAPTER XII.

‘DELICATE GROUND.’

OF course Claud had promised to complete Harry's unfinished drop-scene. Sally herself introduced him to the studio—a necessary ceremony, as, though he had previously been acquainted with his own barn, he hardly recognised it under its new aspect. As he took a hasty glance at the picture, his eyes were at once arrested by the extraordinary blotches of colour that appeared in various places.

‘Can you tell me what he meant to bring in there?’ he asked, pointing to the largest

daub of yellow in the middle of the blue canal.

Sally crimsoned up to the roots of her hair, and Claud, noticing her confusion, mentally blessed himself for asking such an idiotic question. 'It doesn't matter—it can be painted out at once; it won't make the slightest difference,' he said hastily.

'Claud, you are very kind, and you always know without asking questions. I don't mind your knowing,' said Sally, ungrammatically and incoherently, her soft eyes filling with tears. 'Poor Harry! he has ruined his scene, but he couldn't help it. I made him go on painting—it was my fault, Claud. Those Venetian girls were so pretty—and look at them now! Penny dolls would have more sensible expressions.'

'Never mind the Venetian ladies, Sally ;

they will soon come right. I'm afraid it is a worse case for Harry himself.'

Sally shrugged her shoulders slightly, and turned away; she did not feel equal to discussing the subject at this moment.

When the evening arrived, the drop-scene was itself again, and indeed very considerably better than it had ever hitherto been, for Claud was an artist by nature, and had, besides, been nurtured in the land of art; and though his education in more solid matters had been greatly neglected, Judith had given him every advantage in his eager pursuit of art-knowledge, the one study to which the solitary child had turned with unrestrained devotion.

The beautiful reception-rooms of Aylmer's Court were being quickly filled by groups of well-dressed people, amongst whom Judith moved, stately and regal, the most

striking of all the fair women present. She had been mistress in this noble home of her father's for as long as she could remember, virtually so even as a little child during the lifetime of her mother, and actually so during the short episode of her father's second marriage. She was to the manner born, and the knowledge that she could not succeed her father had come on her with crushing force, and had completely warped her character. Judith Aylmer, in a position of power, would have been capable of many fine deeds, and would probably have developed noble qualities; but the same woman unjustly treated by the laws of man would not scruple to fling defiance at the laws of God also. Many who saw her on this night said openly that it was a pity she had not been for all these years the mistress of the Court in her own right;

and not long afterwards they credited themselves with shrewdness almost amounting to prophetic inspiration, for though, in fact, such a remark implied nothing but a vague regret and certainly foretold nothing, it was a sufficient peg on which to hang the well-known sentences commencing, 'Don't you remember, I said——'

Yet, under her regal bearing Judith carried about with her an anxiety which gnawed her more fiercely than the fabled fox had ever preyed on his victim, and which caused her torture. Women of her type—the type to which she had descended since her father's death—worldly and scheming, get little credit from mankind for the possession of any good qualities; yet the one special attribute of a hero, courage, is rarely wanting in their characters. Judith could bear pain, mental

and moral, and make no sign: the strain of a desperate uncertainty, a worse condition of mind than any absolute knowledge, however fatal, could only have been guessed at in her from a passing look in her eyes, an occasional pallor round her mouth, and perhaps by the extreme care she took to be attentive and conciliating to all her guests.

Claud, as usual, effaced himself as much as he could; he was trying to nerve himself for a desperate leap, and that is not the best mental preparation by which to make one's self entertaining to strangers. Mentally, as well as bodily, one requires room for such an effort, a space in which to throw out the arms and take the few quick steps necessary to create the required impetus. Claud felt as if he had no room even to breathe; these people jostled him and gave him no peace. So,

of course, the impression he created was a distinctly unfavourable one—'stupid, silent and conceited' was the inward verdict of many a mother and daughter, while outwardly they bestowed honeyed words on the heir of Aylmer's Court.

'No, no, my dear, not that,' said Mrs. Aylmer, arrayed in her celebrated thistle costume, and with her combined cap on, to an ancient crony, who had ventured, privileged by long friendship, to breathe these adjectives into her ear. 'No, dear, far from that—but scrupulous.'

The gay crowd drifted from the drawing-rooms into the hall, a treasure of oak carving, dark from age. The ceiling especially was so singularly beautiful, being groined with exquisite fan-tracery, that it caught the attention at once, and added greatly to the slips of the unwary

on the highly polished floor. To-night the hall had been transformed and greatly disimproved by being turned into a temporary theatre, one part being occupied by the stage, and the remaining space filled with rows of chairs for the spectators. Of course expressions of delight and surprise at the beauty of the drop-scene were showered on Claud from all sides; he quietly passed them all on to the absent Harry Johnson. Major Aylmer and Sally were of necessity busy on the other side of the curtain, where they were now joined by Judith, who had consented to appear in one of the groups after much pleading on the part of Sally, warmly seconded by Jack, who, as impresario, viewed with enthusiasm the extreme beauty of his cousin, though, as man, it had had remarkably little effect on him. It fell to

Claud, therefore, vaguely assisted by Mrs. Aylmer, to arrange his guests into an audience, finding foremost places for the small and the deaf, separating those whose bitter though trivial warfare might render their propinquity mutually unpleasing, ordering footstools for the gouty and cushions for the infirm, assisting more than one young person who did not desire to be under the immediate eye of her chaperon—and in short doing his utmost to make people comfortable, and consequently not critical.

When his labours were over he threw himself into a chair on the outskirts of the crowd, and sighed heavily; he was worn out by the mental conflict going on in heart and brain, where affection, inclination, and love of ease murmured 'Let things be,' and duty and truth cried 'Speak.' The noise

and the small-talk, and the rattle of the music depressed him beyond measure, and irritated his nerves almost beyond control. At this inopportune moment a voice responded to his sigh—the fat, muffled voice of a dowager with daughters.

‘Ah, Mr. Aylmer, you really do too much for other people, and think too little of yourself. It does not do to be so unselfish.’

‘Unselfish!’ said Claud dreamily. ‘If I were really that, there would be no difficulty; but I’m not.’

‘Yes, you are,’ persisted the matron. ‘And, in that respect, you are so very unlike other young men.’

‘Are young men supposed to be more selfish than young women?’ asked Claud, still with his vague air.

‘Certainly, as a rule; but you are the

exception,' answered the lady, with a winning smile. 'Now you must prove your unselfishness. Come over to us on Saturday.'

'I shall not be here by Saturday, probably,' said Claud hurriedly; then, remembering manners, he muttered the word 'Thanks,' as he made his escape from his tormentor and took refuge at the farther end of the hall.

Along this wall were ranged trophies of ancient weapons and suits of armour once borne gallantly by his ancestors. He envied these dead and gone heroes very sincerely; it was so much easier to go forth into battle at the risk of your life than to struggle through a mental fight at the risk of your soul. As he gazed with wistful eyes at the shining steel, a gentleman standing near addressed him

with slow, sedate voice and ponderous manner :

‘And so, my young friend, you will attain your majority on Friday. Ah! little did I expect that that propitious day would ever dawn for you when I held you, a tiny, fragile babe in my arms at your baptism.’

The solemn voice belonged to Mr. Mowbray, the Rector of Aylmer, and the ponderous manner was also all his own.

‘That propitious day has not dawned yet, Mr. Mowbray, and perhaps it never will,’ said Claud, goaded to desperation. ‘At least, I suppose the dawn will occur; but I doubt the propitiousness of it.’

‘A very extraordinary youth,’ mused the Rector; then, observing the direction of Claud’s eyes, he continued aloud: ‘You are gazing at these relics of a bygone age.

Very interesting—remarkably so, I may say, even to an ordinary observer; but to you, the direct descendant of these doughty warriors—you must indeed be proud of every piece of mail they wore, of every brand they wielded !’

‘Yes, I am,’ said Claud, with a simplicity that somewhat disconcerted the orator.

However, after a moment he took breath again and continued :

‘And they, doubtless, in their turn, look down with pride and interest on their last descendant.’

‘With pride—on *me* !’ ejaculated Claud, half *sotto voce*.

‘And will regard,’ continued the divine, regardless of the exclamation, ‘let us hope, with triumph his battles on the more peaceful scene of Parliamentary debate.’

‘Forgive me if I differ from you on a

subject about which, frankly, I know nothing,' said Claud, with the warm blood in his cheeks. 'I have just been envying these dead ancestors of mine; but if I thought their living spirits could still see and hear all that we say and do, I could never have borne to look upon these husks that once held brave and honest men to whose long purgatory I and mine have added so keen a torture.'

Mr. Mowbray stood speechless in horrified astonishment; the young man was either mad or a Papist—the word 'purgatory,' having fallen on his bewildered ears with startling force, led to this surmise: in either case, his state was perilous to himself, and perhaps dangerous to others. Claud, observing his face of horror, and regretting his hasty words, added quickly:

'You are standing, sir; let me find you

a seat,' and hustled him off before he had time further to consider the matter.

At this moment, the hailstones, scampering mice, and combined crashes of the overture having come to an end, the curtain drew up amidst profound silence, and disclosed the first group of waxworks. It is quite needless to describe these efforts of united nature and art: they were exactly like what are seen everywhere else. There were sailors and soldiers, Robin Hood and Maid Marion, Arabi Pasha and Henry VIII. What representation is at all representative without being graced by the presence of the unhappy Mary Queen of Scots? Queen Elizabeth was there too, her red hair rolled high on her head, and covered with jewels; but the effect of the impersonation was a little marred by the cultured languor thrown into the attitude

by Miss Johnson, and which hardly seemed in keeping with what is known of the character of her sturdy Grace of England. Of course there were the usual shortcomings; some of the figures moved before they were wound up, and remained still after the complicated piece of mechanism which was supposed to set them in motion had been applied to them. Some allowed furtive smiles to chase each other across their countenances.

‘I call that little midshipman the most natural of them all,’ said Mrs. Aylmer to her neighbour. ‘You can see his eyes moving about from here. It is quite too absurdly like nature, my dear.’ The old lady forgot for the moment that she was not speaking of a work of art, and that her usual formula was hardly appropriate.

The three fair sisters as the Graces

formed a really beautiful group; their flowing draperies were all of white, with a little gold carefully introduced, and their pale blue eyes, fair skins and flaxen hair made up a *tout ensemble* with no more colouring than is to be found in Gibson’s tinted statues. Their features were all exquisitely regular, and their forms so graceful as to enable them to undertake this ambitious representation without fear of ill-natured criticism. Not that they had felt either the ambition or the terror; they had simply done what they were asked, leaving all responsibility as to fitness on the shoulders of the asker. They allowed Judith to place them and to arrange their draperies; then they stood so very still and looked so very lovely that the audience were enthusiastic, and the showman waxed classical, and forgot to drop his h’s.

The last group of all was the one in which Judith appeared ; and for splendour of costume and richness of scenic effect this scene eclipsed all previous ones. Judith represented Egypt's haughty Queen with due but not overstrained haughtiness, and with a something of despair in the expression of the dark eyes, whose level gaze was fixed and stony. Arms, neck, and head-dress were covered with the Aylmer jewels, celebrated for their beauty and costliness ; but rare as these gems were, they attracted little attention save as enhancing the beauty of the beautiful woman who wore them. Around her were scattered objects of Eastern magnificence, tiger-skins and rich draperies ; behind her stood Charmian and Iras, and at her feet reclined Mark Antony. Few people recognised Major Aylmer in this figure, the face of

which was not very distinctly seen, for he looked, as in duty bound, at his royal 'Ægypt,' and consequently away from the audience. But the whole pose of the figure expressed, as of course it was meant to do, unbounded devotion. Claud, looking on, gave an almost audible groan. Why could they not have loved each other years ago, and then no wrong would have been done, no miserable reparation would have had to be made? Claud would have had no existence in this evil world at all, a state of things the very contemplation of which is said to be impossible; yet this young life would have chosen never to have existed had choice been possible. Claud looked at Judith with an interest and a pity which he had never felt before; he alone of all the people present understood the despair in her eyes, knew that it was

not acting, but reality. She was his sister; she had watched over him in his childhood: perhaps even now she was repenting of the terrible step she had taken years ago in the wild fury of her desire for revenge.

Claud's heart softened towards his sister; there were only two of them, and there was something terrible to him in the idea that one of them should betray the other. Judith was very beautiful in her despair: that, as a matter of fact, had nothing whatever to do with the magnitude of her crime; but Claud was an artist, and the artistic mind feels without analyzing its feelings, and is influenced unconsciously by the potent charm of beauty. He would break through the barrier of distrust which had arisen between his sister and himself; he would make his last appeal to her this night.

In the meantime, the curtain had gone down amid a storm of applause, and the last and most successful of the tableaux had come to an end. The performers had become human beings once more, and were rubbing their eyes and relaxing their joints generally, after the strain to which they had been subjected, as well as refreshing their systems by libations of champagne and claret cup. Sally had not taken any part in this performance, beyond giving valuable assistance in arranging the groups. 'Thanks, I really cannot stand still to be stared at,' was her steadfast answer to all requests. Now, however, her turn had come. She made a charming Pauline—piquante, silly and tender by turns, attractive to an almost comical extent throughout. Mrs. Brand was radiant. She had seen Claud making his way behind the

scenes, where he performed the thankless office of prompter as carefully as he could, considering that his mind was in such a state of chaos that he scarcely heard what was said ; but the elderly manœuvrer would have been greatly mortified if she could have known the truth, which was simply this, that Claud had never once raised his eyes from his prompter's copy, had given no thought to the performance at all—he was used to Sally's acting ; she always played the parts well—and that he had not exchanged half a dozen words with anyone during the whole time he was assisting at the play. The prompter is always rather ' out of it ' on these occasions, and Claud's pre-occupation of mind placed him not only out of this scene, but in a totally different one of his own creating.

. Jack's Citizen Sangfroid had greatly

improved under Sally's fostering care ; now that he was secure of his words and no longer 'fixed by the dragon,' his coolness under trying circumstances was certainly remarkable, and the personal contrast he formed to their eleventh-hour Alphonse was greatly in his favour. The Baron had very good-humouredly acceded to the prayers of the company, and had undertaken the part. 'The fat, we most arrange him,' he had announced ; and with the aid of a large cloak thrown in the Roman manner, and with a grace an Englishman rarely compasses, over one shoulder, he had arranged it. He played the part with vivacity and ease, and if he imparted a few curiosities of diction into it, this only served to make the audience laugh the more ; and as the object of the author is to make the audience laugh at Alphonse,

the play did not lose its moral. Even Mrs. Brand's occasionally delicate feelings could not be shocked by the idea of any latent impropriety when this solid Alphonse volunteers to bring the green cheese from the moon ; and even her very small stock of humour—usually represented by a minus quantity—did not prevent her joining in the general laugh caused by the stout gallant's face of relief on finding that he was still to be allowed to remain in his bachelor estate ; and the play ended gaily in the midst of this universal mirth.

‘So much better than poor Harry's tragic heroics !’ Sally had said, as she thanked her foreign ally warmly.

‘Ah, mademoiselle,’ he replied sentimentally. ‘In ze play—yes, he is all right. But in life, who gets into zis lofe, he gets not so quickly zere-out !’

And Sally laughed as gaily as the audience had lately laughed—as gaily as if a lover's troubles had never caused her to shed a tear.

CHAPTER XIII.

RESOLVED.

A WOMAN, young and beautiful, had thrown herself where all women, whether they are young and beautiful or the reverse, do throw themselves when they are in sore trouble :

‘ Wer nie sein Brod mit Thränen asz,
Wer nie die kummervollen Nächte
Auf seine Bette weinend sas,
Der kennt euch nicht, ihr himmlischen Mächte !’

This woman might have gained knowledge of the heavenly powers in very early youth, for, short as her life had been, she had for many years known little else but anguish

of mind, intensified and made well-nigh unbearable by the terrible sense of shame which, whether deserved or not, is the most unbearable of all feelings. But she had not gained this heavenly knowledge ; her education had been expressly designed to exclude it, and the grief itself had been of so deadening a nature as to carry no such germs of immortal gladness in it as so many sorrows contain, hidden deep in their dark bosoms. She was sitting on the edge of her bed, with her face hidden in her hands, weeping bitterly ; the lace-trimmed sleeves of her soft white robe had fallen back, owing to the raised position of her hands, and disclosed two lovely rounded white arms. An inarticulate prayer for strength may have pervaded her thoughts, but the feeling of which she was most conscious was an intense overwhelming

pity for herself. Why had her fate been so much more cruel than that of other women? Other women—those women who had been laughing at the play to-night, for instance—had so much, while she had nothing, very literally nothing! Neither home nor country nor friends—even the name she bore had been given to her under a misapprehension; her own identity seemed to her a vague but painful dream, and, worst of all, the respect always given to the young and pure of her sex had been forfeited through no fault of her own, but through the crime of those who should have guarded and held sacred her helpless infancy. If there had been anywhere a lifting of the black cloud that surrounded her—if there had been one tiniest ray of light to bear some message of hope, however faint, to her despairing

heart, that heart would have turned instinctively to its Maker, and she could have prayed for more light. But heart and mind and soul were crushed within her by this unrelieved gloom, and she was conscious of nothing but an intense feeling of self-pity, which brought these bitter tears to her eyes, but which brought no healing balm with them.

A heavy step approached the door leading into the anteroom, but the girl took no heed. The door slowly opened, and Nurse Baker entered, stopping to secure the lock carefully before she came up to her charge.

‘Oh, my dearie, don’t take on so ! you’ll kill yourself !’ cried the old woman, the tears rolling down her cheeks, while she sat down beside the girl and soothed the weary head against her ample bosom.

‘Tell everything to Major Aylmer, my darling ! he is a kind gentleman ; he’ll arrange something. But don’t go on like this, my dear, for you are killing yourself !’

‘I wish I could think so,’ cried the girl, lifting the tear-stained face—the face that we have known as Claud’s—from her hands, which fell down almost lifelessly beside her. ‘But I am young and strong, and not so easily killed. If I could only die ! but Death never comes to those who call to him.’

The old nurse scrambled to her feet again, and stood before the child she had loved and tended for so many years with unwearying devotion. Her manner had lost its usual nervous uncertainty, and she spoke with firmness and almost with dignity.

‘My child, never you say that again! and never let your sister know you ever did say it. Whether you are heir to Aylmer’s Court or no, you are an heir to the Kingdom of Heaven; and don’t you throw up that inheritance, whatever anyone may say to you. Mark my words, Claud, if anything happens to you, or if you disappear without taking me with you—if she spirits you away—don’t you think that will save her. I shall tell the whole story to the nearest magistrate. Oh, my dear! I loved Madam Judith, and she made everyone obey her, and I was flustered and had no time to think, with the poor young mistress dying! But we did you a bitter wrong, and I would walk straight to the gallows sooner——’

‘What is the meaning of this?’ asked Judith’s clear voice. She stood in the

doorway between the two rooms, calm and commanding as ever.

Nurse shrank back into timidity, as if by magic ; but Claud lifted heavy eyes for one instant to her sister's face, and then remained passive as before. The despair of her attitude, the deathly whiteness of her face, set and stern in the rigid monotony of its grief, struck a keener pang to Judith's heart than she would have cared to acknowledge, and stayed the reproaches on her lips. She came forward quietly.

‘ You should not have spoken so loudly, Nurse,’ she said softly. ‘ You alarmed me ; I thought something was wrong. Go and sit in the anteroom till I require you in my room ; and see that no one comes to either room on any pretext whatever.’

Nurse obeyed, going round through Judith's apartment, and leaving the other

door into the anteroom still locked. In spite of her crest-fallen manner, she gave Claud a look out of her bewildered eyes that was meant to be a signal of support and encouragement, but Claud noticed nothing.

Judith came and sat beside the girl, and took one of the resistless, almost lifeless hands in hers.

‘Your plea of a headache was a true one, I see; but I hoped when you excused yourself and retired early that you would have gone straight to bed. They made such a noise at that second supper—the performers’ benefit, as they called it—that I was quite glad you had escaped. Jack was really insupportable.’

Claud scarcely heard two words of this address, and answered not one; so Judith presently resumed:

‘As soon as this is all over—next week—we will have the house to ourselves. You will like that better, Claud. This perpetual noise and bustle wearies you. I find it pall terribly myself. It irritates the nerves without amusing one. They will all be gone—John Aylmer and all—by next week.’

‘Why should you turn John Aylmer out of his own house?’ asked Claud, coming back slowly from her half-stunned state and speaking in a far-off voice. ‘By next week he will know that it is his own house——’

‘Claud, I think you hardly know what you are saying. You are overcome by fatigue. Go to bed—by to-morrow things will appear differently. You must settle with Miss Brand the arrangements for the fancy ball. You will have plenty to think of.’

‘I have plenty to think of,’ said Claud dreamily. ‘But I have nearly thought it out now.’

‘I must just mention one thing before I go,’ said Judith, losing her temper slightly, and consequently forgetting the everyday *rôle* she had adopted, as being the best suited to suppress emotion. ‘I wish you would do away with this costume. You must know you run a frightful risk every time you insist on wearing it.’

‘I run risks always,’ said the girl absently, pulling out the folds of soft lace which covered the front of the almost softer white cashmere robe which she wore. ‘And this is the only one which gives me any pleasure.’

‘You are childish, Claud. But you are tired to-night and overdone. Sleep will restore you. Good-night.’

‘Stay,’ said Claud.

It was perhaps the only occasion for some years on which Claud had shown any desire for her sister’s presence; but Judith did not seem inclined to yield to the wish now.

‘It is too late for any more chat to-night. Do you know that it is past two o’clock, and I am tired myself?’

‘Stay,’ repeated Claud, unheeding Judith’s words.

There was a pause of silence in the room, broken only by the ticking of the clock and the loud breathing of Nurse in the ante-room. Sorrow and fatigue had proved too much for watchfulness, and the old woman was fast asleep. Was there absolutely no other sound?—no stealthy step on the thick carpet of the anteroom—no suppressed breathing outside of the locked door?

Judith heard nothing but the loud beating of her heart, which seemed to throb in her ears. A terrible dread of the next words that she must hear had seized her, and her whole mind was bent on trying to marshal all her forces for the battle she must fight in self-defence. Claud was painfully rousing herself from the half-lethargic state in which she had been sunk, and heard nothing but the quick ticking of the clock, which beat on her numbed brain and increased its bewilderment. She got up slowly, and stood balancing herself for a moment by stretching out helpless hands. There was no one to take them and to hold them in the kind grasp of friendship, there was no firm arm to support the wavering figure; the girl was, as she always had been, morally and physically alone. She gave a quick glance round the room—

there was neither comfort nor inspiration to be derived from its bare walls—no words of counsel, no pictured agony, no graven cross. There was nothing in the room to show that it had had an inhabitant for some weeks; there was nothing to give the slightest index of the tastes and habits of the occupant, who had held herself ready from the first to pass away and leave no trace, realizing that this house was not her home. And yet, as she glanced round it, the desolate aspect of the room—well furnished, perhaps, but unfriendly and unsuggestive—did insensibly have its effect on her mind and strengthened her in the resolve she had made, and even supplied her with the words with which she broke what seemed to both of them a long silence.

‘Judith, can you wish me to lead a life like *this* until I die?’ and she moved her

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hands round her with an indescribably desolate gesture—Italian in its descriptiveness.

‘Like what? I wish you wouldn’t be tragic, Claud, about trifles,’ said Judith, cross, but relieved.

‘The life of a stranger, the life of an alien—of one who can have no home, who can leave no trace, who may not *live* as other human beings may do—who cannot even breathe freely, for fear of betrayal; who dare not have fair, sweet things about her like other women, for fear of discovery.’

‘Nonsense! Art is of no sex, and you are an artist, Claud. If that is all you want, I will take care that your room shall speedily reproduce your love for all that is beautiful.’

‘A few pictures on the wall will not

effect that, Judith,' said Claud, still in the dreamy manner that was habitual to her. 'My room can have no individuality while I have none myself. There is no beauty without truth ; there can be no beauty in my life inwardly or outwardly while everything in it and about it is false. To anyone having eyes to see, this room half betrays my secret ; it shows that I have not dared to be true, though I would not be wholly false—and marks the terrible emptiness of my life.'

'You shall have whatever you like in your room,' said Judith, wilfully misunderstanding her sister's words. 'But we need not discuss this subject in the middle of the night. Wait till to-morrow ; and, once more, good-night.'

Claud had been speaking in a dull, dead tone, and though the very air about her

had seemed quivering with an electric current, she herself had been calm and passionless. But as Judith turned to leave the room, the girl sprang towards her and caught her hands.

‘Judith, to-night you shall hear me,’ she cried, the monotony gone from her voice, and her eyes lighting up with the fire of true passion.

They stood opposite one another, and, alas ! desperately opposed to one another, these two beautiful daughters of a grand old house—equally tall, equally noble-looking, with features so like, but with expressions so dissimilar ; they stood facing each other, brought to bay at last, and in spite of the dark sternness in Judith’s face, there was more fear expressed there than in the softer features of the girl who had been approaching this moment for years,

and whose soul had gradually trained her wavering senses into a fixed determination.

‘It is right that you should know that you may save yourself,’ she said simply. In a crisis of life, who does not speak simply?

She still held Judith firmly in her strong young hands, though the elder sister tried to wrench herself free ; and perhaps this unlooked-for exhibition of physical force impressed Judith more strongly, coming from this young creature whom she had regarded hitherto as a child, than any mental supremacy could have done.

‘Judith, you must hear me ! As soon as I am twenty-one, John Aylmer shall know that this place is his. I will not remain the owner of it for a single day.’

Suddenly Claud relaxed her hold, and fell on her knees at Judith’s feet.

‘Oh, Judith, tell him all the truth yourself; he will be generous and will forgive you. I will never reproach you again for the wrong you did me, if you will spare me now. Let me go away quietly—and tell him yourself!’

‘Never! I would die first,’ answered Judith.

She had sunk into a chair, and kept her eyes turned away from Claud. She gazed out through the uncurtained window at the sky, dark with the darkest hour of the summer night. Suddenly she turned to the girl who crouched a mass of soft white draperies at her knees.

‘Claud, cannot you understand—cannot you feel for me? Cannot you forgive the blind passion of a woman whose love was rejected—scorned by a foolish boy?’ she asked gently, and then she placed her hand

caressingly on Claud's fair head—she believed in the power of her own touch as a means of carrying out the desires of her strong will. 'Can you ask me to confess that I was maddened by his rejection—for I could have loved him? Could you go to a man, even twenty years after, and tell him that?'

'No,' murmured Claud truthfully.

'Then think, Claud, before you decide to blast my life, past and future—think of the position in which I was placed. I loved this place passionately, as I hated that man. You and I belong to this place; we were children of the owner. It was his will that it should pass to us, and not to this distant relative. It was rightfully ours, and not his. I followed our father's wish when I secured the inheritance to his unborn child. Would you turn me out

into the world,adrift—an outcast—for carrying out his will in the only way in which it was possible to me to do so, in face of a law of man's invention, the relic of barbarous times?’

‘Do you think that our father would have sanctioned a fraud?’ asked Claud simply.

Poor child! She had so little to guide her. She had been taught no rules by which to judge of right or wrong; but she clung desperately to her ideal of honour and integrity, embodied to her only by a memory, that of her father, about whom Judith had never wearied of answering her childish questions, blinded by the interest of the subject to the danger of it.

Judith did not answer Claud's question now. She grew paler, and she felt it—this miserable weakness that shattered her will. She turned and looked out into the night

once more. Claud drew away her head from under Judith's hand before she spoke again.

'He would not. You know that he would not. He would tell us to make reparation ; and, Judith, I mean to do it.'

'You are ungrateful, bitterly ungrateful!' cried Judith, starting to her feet. 'For your sake I made sacrifices few women would have made ; for your sake I expatriated myself and left this dearly-loved home ; for your sake I married a man whom I despised, and with whom I had not an idea in common.'

'You married your accomplice to conceal your crime,' said Claud dreamily, and hardly aware of the words she used. The look Judith turned on her startled her back into full consciousness. There could be no more playing at tenderness between

them; it was war now, and the strongest would win.

Claud rose to her feet, and concentrated her faculties, too apt to be seeking for light and guidance in a discursive, blind fashion, on the present moment.

‘Judith, do not think that I cannot understand—that I am without pity. That is not the case. But no fault can be forgiven without confession and atonement. You did not teach me that, but I have learnt it, and it is true. I must confess, if you will not, and we must both atone. I will not go down to the grave, having lived a life that was one long falsehood from first to last. I will lead a life without concealment, without constant dread of discovery, without bitter humiliation.’

‘Heroics are wasted on me,’ said Judith coldly. ‘Do you realize the fact that if

you throw away this inheritance, and if I cast you off, which I shall do, that you will have *nothing*, absolutely nothing—that you will have to beg or steal your bread?’

‘I can work for it. Even if I live the hard life of a peasant-woman I shall feel no shame in thinking of our father, Judith, or of our ancestors, who were true and loyal gentlemen. Oh, Judith, that we, you and I, the last of our race, should be the first to disgrace it!’

‘It is you that will disgrace it,’ said Judith, white with passion; ‘and I should have thought that idea might have kept you silent. If you cared for the memory of the dead you would be content to go down to the grave in silence rather than speak and throw reproach upon the name they honoured.’

‘The wrong has been done, and the

reproach must follow,' said Claud wearily. 'Would any honest man tell me to keep estates that belong to another person, and to live in a house that is not mine?'

'If that is all, there is still a way,' whispered Judith, drawing nearer. 'If you are as careful as you say of the honour of our name, there is still a way to preserve it absolutely spotless. In the event of your death now—before you are of age, the estates would go to John Aylmer.'

'You told me that before; but one does not die because one is wanted to—not even if one wishes it one's self.'

'If you really wish it, you can,' said Judith quietly, but avoiding the steady gaze of Claud's eyes. 'We have plenty of dynamite in use at the quarries—young people are careless. Claud, it could be done.'

Claud neither spoke nor moved. After a moment Judith continued, whispering, lest even the slumbering nurse or the winds of heaven should hear her :

‘I have in my own room a pretty toy—a little black and scarlet plaything. You let it fall from your hand, Claud—and that is all.’

‘Go!’ said Claud. ‘I have told you what I mean to do. Leave me.’

The change produced in Judith by these few words was startling; the hot blood rushed into her face which had been so colourless; she clenched her hands passionately, and forgetting caution in her anger at the scorn with which her whispered suggestions had been received, she raised her voice so as to give emphasis and force to the bitter words which she flung at her sister.

‘Do not try to deceive me, wretched girl, even if it pleases you to deceive your own soul. I see through your pretences. It is a lie, this sudden devotion to truth and uprightness. If your motive had been simply what you stated it to be, you would have sacrificed yourself and have preserved our name. You prefer to sacrifice me that you may revel in your imaginary virtue, and in the end gain back all you give up. Fine words at a small cost! It is not difficult to sacrifice a sister and a faithful servant, to give up estates, and to cause endless scandal and trouble when one is moved by a mad passion. Your secret is a very transparent one: you love this man —John Aylmer.’

Claud remained absolutely silent for a few moments, speechless with astonishment and horror: at the coarse and insulting

words of Judith she had turned very pale, and her pallor continued till she began to speak, when life and outraged feeling returned together, sending the rosy flood of indignation into her fair face. If Judith thought this taunt would turn her from her purpose, she was wrong. She gave a short laugh of utter scorn.

‘It would be as wise to talk to a ghost of love as to speak of it to me, who have been as one dead while yet alive. Judith, I trust that while we continue on this earth, you and I may never meet again. I would have forgiven the wrong you did me in my infancy when my helplessness ought to have been my safety, but I will not forgive the insult to my womanhood. If you do not leave the house to-morrow I will speak to John Aylmer at once: if I find that you have gone, I will wait till

Friday. You have made the task more difficult, but I shall not fail. Pray—if you ever pray—for a clean heart, Judith, and for a purer mind.'

And without word or gesture of farewell, Claud turned abruptly, and, unlocking the door, passed out hastily into the anteroom; so hastily that the woman who had been stooping beside the door, listening keenly for each word she could catch, had only time to sink into a chair and feign sleep. So preoccupied was Claud that she passed between the two women without noticing either of them, longing only in her shame for the darkness to hide her, and in her excitement for the cool night wind to blow on her hot forehead. Without looking to the right or left, blind, but with the instinct of a sleep-walker, she sped down the dark stairs, through the hall where the faint

light was reflected, dim and weird, on the armour of the dead Aylmers, past the shadowy stage into the drawing-room, peopled with shadows also. She let herself out through one of the windows, out on to the terrace, where she lay prone, with the bats wheeling and flitting round her fallen head, and the lizards even venturing to scurry lightly over her motionless body.

END OF VOL. I.

